every hateful instrument

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/38711034.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham & Abigail Hobbs
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Abigail Hobbs, Mason Verger, Margot Verger, Jack Crawford, Matthew Brown (Hannibal), Rinaldo Pazzi, Beverly Katz, Brian Zeller, Jimmy Price, Alana Bloom, Freddie Lounds, Abel Gideon, Peter Bernardone, Clark Ingram, Randall Tier, Chiyoh (Hannibal), Bedelia Du Maurier, Anthony Dimmond, Judy/Margot Verger - Character
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Medieval, gothic fantasy, Hitman!Will, Dark Will Graham, Living Dead Girl Abigail Hobbs, Canon-Typical Child Death, Canon-Typical Cannibalism, dolorous stroke meet-cute, (scribbled in the margins of an illuminated manuscript in glitter gel pen) killing and violence, Intercrural Sex, Alternate Universe - Bodyguard, a fair amount of bloodsport and animal allegory but a shocking lack of outright petplay, Hunters & Hunting, Hurt/Comfort, Bathing/Washing, Rimming, Praise Kink, Rough Oral Sex, Frottage, Class Differences, Poisoning, Trial by Combat, Flogging, Handfasting
Language:	English
Collections:	The Temple Of Athens
Stats:	Published: 2022-05-01 Completed: 2022-10-30 Words: 83,376 Chapters: 20/20

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by wastrelwoods

Summary

"I feel like we had a miscommunication here," Lord Verger croons. "Maybe I was unclear. What I said was 'Kill Hannibal Lecter for me'. But what you just did--" He leans in close enough to smell the port on his breath, and the ever-present slaughterhouse effluvia beneath. "--was doublecross me and make yourself his personal bodyguard."

"I'm going to kill him," Will grits out, lip curled in a half-swallowed snarl. "I will. Soon. Just not yet."

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Lord Hannibal Lecter is a nobleman with a reputation for ruthlessness. Will Graham is a woodsman with a grudge. They are both in the business of revenge.

Notes

HEY HI HELLO so. I had a few disparate ideas get subsumed into one bigger, more sprawling idea and then turn inside out to become a self-indulgent Arthuriana flavored medieval/fantasy AU which I am literally desperate to beam directly into anybody's brain save my own, where it has been rotating like doner kebab for six fucking months already and shows no signs of being all the way cooked yet...yum yum carve you off a piece, eat up!

I expect to cap out at around 50-60k when all is said and done but truly longform fic is not my usual standard so I guess we will go hand in hand and find out together my brother!! Anything is possible! Keep an eye on chapter notes for more specific content warnings and annotation and so on and so forth and I hope you have a good time! (If you have a good time you have to tell me that's the rules)

EDIT: obligatory link to accompanying spotify playlist if that is your thing because it is definitely mine! just some songs I had on repeat while writing, some inspo, some Vibes -- LINK

Title taken from The Mountain Goats 'Getting Into Knives', and while I HAVE researched a lot I also prioritize genre and vibes over striving for a strict representation of any specific time and place. Which is to say I am neglecting to feature the Catholic Church entirely. They've done enough

Currently updating once a week on my Saturday evenings and if that changes I will let you know!

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

> content warnings: canon-typical depictions of violence and death, some intermittent self-hatred and suicidal ideation (as you might expect, Will is going through some stuff. has gone through some stuff. will continue to go through some stuff if I have anything to say about it), Mason Verger doing what he does so love to do (torment)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will is sharpening his hunting knife when the old soldier walks in, busy turning the blade on the whetstone with firm, even strokes. Candlelight dances over the steel edge, cold and bright.

There aren't many empty seats left in the tavern with snow falling thick and fast outside. Almost every table full save the one he's propping his boots on, tucked away in a quiet corner, out of reach of the intermittent gusts that blow in off the street with every new arrival. Nobody minds Will in his quiet corner and nobody glances twice at the empty seat beside him.

Nobody except the newcomer with his salt-and-pepper beard, who lowers himself into it only a minute later with a foamy ale and a sigh. The rhythm of Will's work falters and the flat of the blade tilts to catch his reflection. Round, tanned face, slightly flinty eyes, a sharp hook of a nose. The glint of a signet ring on a chain resting under his collar, only a little less conspicuous than it might be on his finger. "This wind howls and bites like a wild dog," the stranger greets with a friendly tilt of his drink. “It is a bad night for a long journey, hm?”

Will tilts his blade away again, eyes low. He slides his feet begrudgingly to the floor. "Helps if you dress warmer."

The old soldier huffs out a breath of a laugh and shakes his head. "Well, I am a long way from home, I am not used to the cold," he demurs, his voice thick with the rolling accent of the southern sea, and reaches out for the elbow of the passing barmaid. "Another drink for my friend, too, if you please!"

Will tucks his knife away but keeps the flat scowl on his face. "Are we friends?"

"We could be." The soldier leans forward, offers a weathered hand. "Rinaldo Pazzi."

"Will." He hovers in expectation of a title or surname. None is forthcoming. He has few to give, and none he cares to claim.

The tavern girl brings another drink and Will slips her a coin. Pazzi sits back, flinty eyes still poring over his face. "You keep your knives very sharp, Will."

"Good tool demands a certain degree of upkeep. Can't work with a dull knife.”

“You seem to keep it in especially good condition. Your favorite?”

Will hums. “It’s a family heirloom.”

"You are a hunter?"

One corner of Will's mouth twitches, involuntary. "I am."

"Honest work." Pazzi shrugs. "And in the dead of winter, when the big game sleeps under the snow or runs away south? When there is no good hunting to be had, what do you do, my friend Will?"

Will sips at his drink, hidden amusement still dancing in the shadows of his face. "Less honest work, sometimes," he says agreeably, "If it keeps food on the table. What job are you trying to offer me now, Sir Pazzi?"

The old soldier laughs a deep rumble of a laugh, caught out. "You see right through me, Signor."

"Didn't seem like you were trying very hard to hide it. Your hands are covered in sword calluses," Will lists. "And I've never known a man to crop his hair as close as yours who wasn't a knight. Is it a tourney that brings you so far north?"

"I have a little business there," Pazzi agrees with a quirk of one heavy brow. "Prize money to be won. Think on it, my friend. Have you never wanted to see Ravenstag for yourself? The Lord of the North throws a legendary feast."

Will snorts, dryly. "Tasteless."

"Do you have much trouble with taste?"

Will's lips thin. "I see more than enough butchery in my work, and I know the stories. The Vulture can carve up his enemies and serve them up spitted and roasted to his friends all he wants, I have no appetite for it."

"I intend to tempt you with coin," the old soldier says, "Not carrion. Come with me to the midwinter hastilude. Be my companion."

Will runs his hand over the scrape of stubble on his jaw and fights back a wide, toothy grin. "Be your bodyguard, you mean." Bubbling laughter rises hot in his chest and he shifts sideways in his seat. "Looking for protection, Sir Pazzi?"

There's a terse silence between them. Pazzi drums his knuckles on the warped grain of the table. "It would ease my mind not to travel alone. Lecter is a very formidable figure, even to those who do not dine at his table. A dangerous man. The story is he had two dozen villages in the eastern woodland burned to ash and salted the ground because a vassal lord there would not bend the knee."

Something else twists in Will's stomach now, much sharper and colder. Bile coats the back of his tongue.

"They say his company rode through the countryside backed by a red sunset. Men with torches and pikes astride bears and lions and elephants. The river ran red with blood for a hundred leagues, and then went dry as bone."

"*Elephants*," Will scoffs with a jagged bark of a laugh. His eyes fix on the floor, stinging and glassy. "They rode horses, or they marched on foot. Like any other army. It was a massacre, not a traveling circus."

Flinty eyes are watching him again, narrowed, burning with keen alacrity. Will pushes back in his chair hard enough to make it rattle and stands.

"It is a terrible thing," Pazzi murmurs in a softer register. "To lose one's home. My condolences."

"It was a long time ago," Will says, flat and toneless. He buckles the hunting knife to his belt with a stiff tug. "Good luck with your tournament, Sir Pazzi."

He staggers up the stairs on unsteady feet to his room in the inn above. The air is tinged with the lingering smell of blood and smoke, thick and cloying. Will breathes through clenched teeth and sits with his back to the wall until the past unhooks its jagged claws from beneath his skin. He rests his head against the lintel of the doorframe, carves red divots in the meat of his palms with his hands clenched into tight fists. Marvels at how strange it is to move through the world the way he does, a pitiful crawling thing lingering between deaths, less a man than a shadow suspended on dust. Made up of the sharp-edged fragments of a piece of shattered crockery, still holding a semblance of the right shape by some whim of inertia and gravity.

Gradually the howling of the wind dies down and the past recedes like a low tide. It drags the better part of Will away with it, swept off in the undertow. The hollow shell left behind picks himself up from the floor and rolls away the stiffness in his spine. Cracks his neck, wipes his eyes, shrugs on a heavy dark cloak and a pair of thick leather gloves.

Will sets his jaw and goes back to his hunt.

His quarry is lingering just outside the stables, checking over tack and watching the snow drift by in flurries by the low torchlight. For a man who comprehends that he is at risk well enough to seek out a hired bodyguard, he does not exercise much caution. He does not turn his head at Will's muffled footsteps. Doesn't see the shadows shift as he stalks closer.

Will sees the whites of his eyes before he lunges, catches Pazzi's shout with a hand clamped tight over his mouth and knocks his skull hard into the heavy oak gate of the stall. There's the beginning of a surprised oath, lost in the dull crack of his temple against wood.

"Apologies, Signor," he grunts as he crouches in the mud and slush and hay and meets those flinty eyes, hazy now from the stunning blow. "But I really can't be your friend."

The hunting knife at his belt sings when he draws it, keen edged and well-polished. He sinks it into the old soldier's gut with a grunt, watches him gasp and squirm without blinking. Does his butchery with businesslike precision.

Pazzi makes a strangled noise, either a plea or a curse, and grasps white-knuckled at Will's arm. Tries to bite at the hand clamped over his mouth.

Will sighs and digs his fingers harder into the ridge of his jaw to hold it shut. "You made a bargain, Sir Pazzi, do you remember it? The last time you came to the north. Enough gold to wipe away all your debts, in return for a small favor. I hope you remember. Lord Verger does."

Pazzi's eyes go wide, and Will swallows the sour taste coating his tongue, feels blood running hot and slick over his wrist as he leans closer.

"Mason sends his regards," he says with a tired sigh, and drags the blade upward. "Next time keep your promises."

Agony and terror twist Pazzi's round face before the light flickers out of it. Will grits his teeth and lets the body slump lifeless into the mud at his feet. The wind blows icy and bitter, and the hot blood soaking his hands is swiftly going cold.

Will snaps the chain that holds his ring, cuts loose his purse and takes the saddlebag from the tack hanging beside the stall. Leaves the corpse behind in a graceless heap of offal, to be stumbled over by a stable boy sometime before sunrise. Inelegant, but elegance is not the point of this kind of work.

He rides away through the swirling storm with the blood still drying tacky on his skin and casts his mind back to a clear, sun-dappled river. Birdsong in the air and wildflowers growing thick along the banks. A place he can never go back to.

The stream, conjured as it is from intangible distant memory, does not wash him clean.

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He reaches Muskrat Farm before the next dusk, saddle-sore and bleary-eyed with exhaustion. Slides sideways off his mare's back and trudges beside her through the creeping woods of the demesne. Empty branches twist above his head, reach out into the silver sky like the points of a crown wrought in dark iron. Snow blankets and stifles the ever-present smell of rot that hangs over the landscape in the warmer months. Almost lovely, in a cold and distant sort of way.

"There's a witchy beauty about this place, isn't there?" chimes a familiar voice, in greeting.

Abigail falls into step beside him, bundled under her warmest cloak, hair falling loose and dark over her wind-chapped face. Cheeks flushed pink with cold, a soft smile dancing over her mouth.

Will shies away and reaches up to scrub a little of the mud and blood from his face, brush back his tangled hair. Something like shame prickles in his gut at the recognition of his disheveled appearance. "Pretty on the surface. Ugly underbelly. It's not the first place I would have wanted to put down roots."

She quirks an eyebrow at him. "You don't have roots," she accuses, sharp and teasing. "You never have. Not even in Wolf Trap. How long will you stay this time? A week? Two? Why bother to unpack your bags?"

Will shuffles the pack lower on his back and drops his gaze to his feet.

"Did you bring anything back for me, at least?" Abigail asks, pushing up hopefully onto her toes, craning to see past the barrier of his shoulder. Endearingly childlike, a young woman playacting at girlhood because she knows well that Will will let her get away with it. Happy to dote and cosset and indulge, in his unpracticed, rough-hewn way. "Come on, you must have brought me *something*. You've been away for weeks. I was starting to worry you had packed up and left me for good."

"Never." Will ducks his head and shrugs the pack off his shoulder, reaching in to pull out some trinket on reflex, an orange or a scarf or a polished wooden comb. Then he hesitates, caught in the belated realization that he has nothing with him that wasn't plucked as a trophy off a corpse. Stills mid-step, and feels his face go tight. Nola nickers and pushes her nose into his shoulder.

"Will?" Abigail's voice goes soft with worry. "Something wrong?"

He clutches at the leather strap of his bag and blinks, then looks helplessly from her rosy-cheeked face to the bloody ruin of her throat.

She reaches up to map the line of the open wound with one small hand. Blood trickles darkly between her fingers. "Oh. Right."

Will stares as she sways on her feet, half reaches out as if to brace and catch her when she falls but knows with returning clarity that she is only light and color and memory, and bound to slip through his fingers. "I'm sorry." His voice scrapes hoarsely in his own ears. "You wouldn't like it here, Abigail. Not really."

Blood bubbles up between her teeth as she smiles, grimly, understanding too well. "Wouldn't like you, you mean. The way this place makes you."

Teeth gritted, heart in his throat, he turns his back and stalks off into the trees. Abigail lets him go with a lingering sad look. When he looks back over his shoulder at the crest of the hill, she's vanished like smoke.

Wind bites at his face and his fingers. By the time he staggers through the servant's entrance at the back gatehouse, leading Nola by the bridle, the sensation is numb and far away.

"Will!" Jack calls, already on him the same instant he steps over the threshold, tugging him in to a hearty embrace that almost sweeps him off his stumbling feet. Clapping him on the back, and stepping back to survey the damage. "You smell like a slaughterhouse."

He curls his lip in a thin, humorless smile. "We're standing in the middle of one now, Jack."

"Ah, excuses, excuses," he blusters as he reaches up to muss Will's hair. Thinks better of the gesture when he feels the day-old sweat and blood caked into it and wrinkles his nose in distaste. "You get your man?"

"I got him," Will confirms. He unlaces the ties of Pazzi's purse to drop the iron ring cast with his family crest into Jack's open palm. "You can send that to Lord Verger from me. Tell him the job's done."

Jack's smile flickers and dims. "Tell him yourself."

"There's my bloodhound!"

Another hand cards through Will's hair, this time grasping the curls at the crown of his head and tugging, just sharp enough to sting. A leash pulling taut.

Will bites his tongue and breathes slow and even while Mason Verger bends his head back, baring his throat, and then grasps him by the chin and turns his face to the side, for all the world like he might dig under his lip with a thumb and inspect his teeth. Proprietary. He knows exactly how the way he touches Will makes him itch. It's half the fun. Lord Verger likes to watch his playthings squirm.

"Ah, ah," he tuts, warning, when Will breaks and tries to pull away. "Down, boy." He counts to ten and averts his eyes so the prickling urge to snarl or snap doesn't register too plainly, but Mason only grins and tilts his face closer, forcing contact. Amusement is plain in his sparkling gray eyes, the sly curl of his lips. Will's neck trembles with the strain of bending unnaturally to one side. After a beat, Mason releases him and pats at his cheek with an open palm. "Atta boy. Took your sweet time on that hunt, didn't you? How's Rinaldo?"

"Lord Verger," Jack tries valiantly to interrupt, holding out the ring Will handed him, but Mason only waves a hand at him, entirely dismissive.

"In a minute, Captain, me and Mister Graham are talking now. Mano a mano." He grins, endlessly pleased by whatever simmering hatred he reads in Will's twitching face. "Go on, speak."

Will's jaw flexes. "Gave him your message," he imparts. "Gutted him and left him in a stable a day's ride east."

"It's a damn shame," Mason croons with a satisfied smile. He peers down his nose at the mess that smeared over his fingers when he handled Will's grimy face, then wipes it clean on his fur-trimmed cloak. "I hate to see a good man come to a bad end, don't you? But I can't have my friends taking my money and running off with it! Honesty, gentlemen, that's the best policy. If I scratch your back, I expect you to scratch mine, right? Right?"

Will glowers at him in strained silence, but Jack does his part and nods flatly.

"*Thank* you, Captain. I knew you'd understand. You always do." He waltzes a few paces closer, brushes another supercilious touch over the guardsman's uniform sitting on Jack's shoulders. Ring-studded hands against dull silver pauldrons. "I like a man who honors an agreement the way you do. You came to me three years ago with this one *clinging* to life, just pitiful, one of the most hopeless cases I've ever seen, and you *beg* me to save him out of the goodness of my heart, and what did I do? Didn't I do just what you asked?"

Jack glances sidelong at Will, who grits his teeth and keeps his eyes low. The salty-sweet lingering taste of old blood clots on his tongue. "You did, Lord Verger."

"And in return, Captain, for my kind, noble service, I get to keep him. Quid pro quo, like every good business. Tit for tat. Everybody wins!"

Will blinks harshly down at the slush that clings to his boots and bites back the rising urge to retch. "I did the job," he says dully. "Tell me when you need me to kill the next man and I'll do that, too."

He spins on his heel, makes it nearly halfway to the courtyard before Mason calls after him, "Mister Graham!"

He stops.

"You're housebroken, aren't you? Don't run away with your tail between your legs! Don't I deserve a little gratitude?"

Will feels the phantom of his daughter's sad eyes on him like a boot to his ribs, watching him muzzle himself like an ill-kept mongrel. Ashamed of him or for him. Either possibility stings. He bites his tongue so hard he tastes fresh blood. "Thank you."

Mason laughs. "Ah, come on. I trained you better than that!"

Will straightens his spine, and stares unseeing into the middle distance. "Thank you, my Lord."

He marches away twice as fast as before, because if he stays long enough to hear Mason's parting *good boy* he can't be sure he won't do something reckless. He hears the echoing squeal of laughter across the courtyard regardless.

Chapter End Notes

sorry Pazzi my man you are such a redshirt! Sorry Abigail I promise being dead will not prevent you from being around to affect the narrative and also I will make it up to you next time bestie! Sorry to myself for not being able to resist a quick little lampshade reference to Hannibal Barca with the elephant thing but I'm having fun letting Hannibal have a mythos that kind of precedes him

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> content warnings: more of the kind of implicit references to abuse that you might expect from having Mason Verger around. The third section also includes an extended narration of Mizumono-like violence and character death, which as a big emotional lynchpin I have tried not to pull any punches with, so. Know that!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Blood and dirt and sweat scrub off his skin and out of his tangled hair, but it's slow work and can't touch the grime that permeates deep beneath the skin, the stains of three years of indenture as Mason Verger's personal killer. Half a tool and half a pet lymer, no will of his own, only living to bring his liege lord's enemies to bay and bite whenever he's bidden.

Will scrubs furiously at the brand burned into his chest, a little to the north of his heart, House Verger's emblem marked in twisted ropes of hypertrophic scarring. Brushes his fingers lower to trace the ridge of the other mark, a long hooked slash that bisects his abdomen in a silver line. Predating the brand by a handful of days. He was conscious for the first wound – the cold bite of the sword splitting him open, quick as a lightning strike – but the second was already seared into his skin by the time he woke again.

He always dismisses Jack's gruff apologies when they come. There might be another tonight if he manages to corner him in the hall after dinner, a little more guilt prompted by Mason's overt goading this afternoon. It's a mixed blessing to save a man's life and bargain it away in one fell swoop. But Will understands why he did it. He fairly brims over with understanding. Forgiveness is a little harder.

The whole countryside was razed to a bitter wasteland when Lord Lecter's men marched through Wolf Trap on the way to forcibly relieve an upstart minor noble of his holding. The forest and the town burned to ash and rubble, fields were salted in spilled blood. Will's little cottage and the woodland around it and the quiet life he made there went up in smoke, and a hundred more like him lost everything they had. All pawns sacrificed in the games between far-off rich men with little at risk but pride and inkblots on a map.

Jack Crawford is a proud man too, but not a titled one. Obstinate, bullheaded, and faithful to a fault. He sifted through the dead and dying and found Will among them, fading but not yet gone, and heaved him over his shoulders with a resolve stubborn enough to grind mountains to dust. Brought him to Muskrat Farm, bargained for Lord Verger's physicians to intercede, to mend his mortal wounds.

He's stayed here beside him even three years on, sticking around for Will's sake though he's under no real obligation. Still trying to protect him. Determined to save just one lamb from slaughter, any way he can, even by damning them both.

Will supposes Jack can't be blamed for the bad luck of choosing the one lamb who turned out to be more wolf in the end.

He shrugs on a homespun cotehardie and buckles the hunting knife at his belt, cleaned and oiled and honed to a new edge. He wonders if Lord Verger has had his fill of humiliation for the day, or if he can expect to have jeers and scraps tossed at his face from the head table all evening. He's been made to eat off the floor before. Mason likes his petty games. Will takes a seat far down the far side of the hall, just in case, and grimaces when the place beside him is filled almost immediately. Not by Jack, who's busy standing guard tonight. It's one of the younger mercenaries, tall and beardless with a lean and hungry face and keen, bright eyes. He doesn't speak, but he watches close enough to make the hair on Will's arms stand on end.

Will keeps his head low and eats without tasting. Shuts his eyes to picture his quiet stream, the gentle susurrus of the water, the wind swaying in the long grass. Fishing on the bank with Abigail beside him weaving a daisy chain, summer freckles coming in on her nose and the apples of her cheeks.

A sharp whistle cuts through the peaceful landscape. Will glances to the side to see Lord Verger clicking his tongue in his direction, beckoning.

Wine brims and sloshes against the edge of his goblet as he drinks and laughs, waving one hand in a come-hither motion. A heavy gold band set with fat jewels sits crooked on his brow. His sister Lady Margot perches at his right hand like a flower pressed in a book – pretty and flat and half-lifeless. Her sleeves are pulled habitually low over her wrists to hide any bruising. As Mason jeers her gray eyes find Will's and her mouth twitches in a thin, dry smile.

Will pushes out of his seat and goes where he has been called. The sellsword follows trailing half a step behind him. Will's brow furrows when he hears it.

Lord Verger preens and looks between Will and his shadow with a wine-soaked grin. "Just the man I wanted to see. Come, sit, I have a job for you, Graham. How are those teeth of yours, hm? Nice and sharp?"

"I'll stand," Will grunts, in lieu of dragging him across the table by the collar and spitting in his hateful face.

"Will," Margot says, tonelessly, and he meets her eyes again and inclines his head in a quick approximation of a bow. His hackles lower a little.

Mason holds up his cup and waits for a servant to step closer and top it off. "Have you met Matty yet? He's a big admirer of your work. Matthew, you already know my prize bloodhound. Matthew and I were talking, you know, when he came to me to rent out his services, and he made an excellent point." He picks meat off the bone and chews it lazily, mouth half open to go on grinning wide and slanted. "About bear-baiting. You're familiar, Mister Graham? My Papa's favorite sport. Well, it's no fun with just one dog in the mix. You need a whole pack to even out the odds. Let one mongrel circle the big game and pin it down, so the one leading the charge gets a better angle to go for the throat. And I have a specific throat in mind. One tasty mouthful. You'll love it."

When Will turns to look over his shoulder, Matthew is waiting to meet his gaze, something ravenous in his thin face. His eyes are sharp and dark and his mouth is curved in a soft smile.

"You two," Lord Verger crows, leaning conspiratorially over his trencher, "Are gonna kill Hannibal Lecter for me."

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Margot knocks on his door long after the fires go out. Will draws the bolt and watches her brush past him like an icy draft, wrapped in fur and satin with her wavy hair hanging long and loose down her back. He shuts the door behind her and pours the wine he sets aside for her midnight visits as she settles with her face turned away from the flickering candlelight. There's a small red scrape at the corner of her jaw he'd missed before.

They drink their cups in silence. A while after the alcohol starts to warm his blood, she sighs, and draws the fur tighter around her shoulders. "He had a man fed feet-first to the hogs while you were away. Carlo's helping train a new breed, apparently. Pigs eat anything, but he wants them to learn to expect their meals still kicking and screaming."

Will quirks an eyebrow. "Sounds like I'm being replaced."

She smiles, but there's little real humor behind it. "He'll probably start asking you to bring your game back alive. Make a big show of it. Not Lecter, though. The truth is I think he makes Mason nervous."

Will takes that in and chews on his lip, considering. Verger's a bully, which comes hand in hand with cowardice. A lifetime of unchecked hedonistic viciousness. Cruel by nature, but nervousness makes him crueler. "What's he like?"

"Lord Lecter?" Candlelight dances in Margot's eyes. "Strange. Hard to read. A very polite butcher. Papa always wanted to expand the holding to the north, so my brother's probably just following his guidance, sending you to take out the competition. But it might be personal too. He had one of his guard escorting me around when we visited Ravenstag last midsummer. She carried a big crossbow. Mason didn't get within ten feet of me the whole trip." She sighs, wistfully. "Then we came home and he broke my arm in two places. But it was nice while it lasted."

Will frowns and downs the rest of his cup in a bitter swig. "Do you imagine killing him as often as I do?"

Margot smiles wryly. "I've known Mason all my life. I'm always imagining it." She leans against the bedpost and her loose hair falls gracefully over her shoulder. "I could have smothered him in his crib, I suppose. Then I'd be a scullery maid somewhere, free and destitute. You'd just be dead."

The brand pulls uncomfortably at the skin of Will's sternum. Knowing that much himself hasn’t stopped him wishing for it, some dark nights. He shrugs to alleviate the itch and holds out the pitcher for Margot to top off her cup. She looks away, instead, and sighs again. Hesitating.

"I'm tempted to ask the same favor I asked you before. The one that made you shut the door in my face. Would your answer change?"

Will's fingers tighten and flex. He sets down the jug. "I… no. No."

Margot nods like she expected nothing less.

"I'm not—" He huffs. "Not really the fatherhood type."

"Well, I'm generally averse to the concept of fucking men," she concedes with a sardonic shrug. "We all make sacrifices to get a legacy."

"*Really* not the legacy type, either. And it's not exactly impossible for you to have a child by someone you actually *like*, even if it might be longer odds."

"I like you," she huffs in a slightly snide murmur.

"I meant there are men who bear children," Will rebuffs, arms folded over his chest, "And women who sire them. And plenty of both who are better suited to your purposes. You don't *need* me, my Lady, don't have to settle for—"

"It really bothers you so much, the idea of helping me?" A gentle hurt creeps in at the margins of her face, the ragged edges where the bruises and scrapes hide.

Will sucks in a slow, careful breath, and drops to a knee beside her. "I will help you any way I can, Margot," he promises. "I'll defend any legacy that falls into your lap. But I can't give you that."

"You're no fun," Margot grumbles, but goes back to sipping at her wine. "You'd be a good father, I think," she muses like an afterthought.

Will feels something squeeze tight and painful in his throat. It comes close to choking a wounded noise out of him, but he bites down and smothers the impulse.

Lady Margot glances at him like she heard it anyway. "Not a total wash, at least. I'll admit my standards are a little skewed. Verger men are pigs."

"I have to pack, My Lady," Will manages in a harsher tone than he meant to let slip. "For the hunt."

She sighs, long and low, and stands, offering him the dregs of her wine and adjusting the robes around her shoulders. When she brushes past again on the way out to the hall she reaches out and touches a hand to his arm, like an apology. "If Lord Lecter catches you," she says, matter-of-fact, "He's probably going to eat you."

Will gives her a crooked slip of a grin. "I'll be sure not to give him the chance."

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The river runs clear and deep, dancing over stones in quick gentle ripples. Fish dart by in the shallows, visible only as silver flickers of shadow.

Another flickering shadow darts between the trees as Will turns his face to the opposite bank. A whipping tangle of dark hair, there and gone again. It assuages his worries to remember that Abigail is small and fast and clever. A good hunter, like her father taught her to be.

Will himself keeps low to the ground, shifting silently through the undergrowth, following at a distance, his bow clutched in his hand, sweat dripping into his eyes, already irritated from the rising smoke.

Most of the men combing the woods move with little attempt at subterfuge, breaking branches underfoot and shouting harsh commands to one another that ring in the air. Soldiers, mercenaries, a few opportunistic crusaders. Men more used to brute skirmishes on open plains than skilled venery. Still, there are dozens, and any one could still chance a stumble directly into prey, if they get lucky.

Or if he gets unlucky. Will stumbles and knocks a stone from the bank into the stream, and holds his breath as the splash echoes. As if in answer, a crossbow bolt sings past his ear to thud into the trunk of an overhanging oak. He inhales sharply and breaks into a sprint, twigs snapping with every step and branches slicing at his face and arms as he races along the bank.

Wolf Trap and the cottage that used to be his home aren’t far behind him, door kicked down and thatch roof caved in to pour out black, billowing smoke. Broken bolts scattered on the ground, the

sharp smell of terror on the wind, the fading echo of a plea to

Run, get out of here now, quickly—

—What's happening? Will, who are they—

—I don't know. I don't know, but we have to leave. I'll meet you at the stream, Abigail, please, go—

Smoke and soot and ash cast an unnatural pall over the sun. The river churns like a boiling pot, darkening to red, and between one blink and the next something else steps out from between two trees to block Will's path. Something made of shadows and sharp teeth, dark-eyed and otherworldly, painted crimson-black with gore and crowned in a halo of antlers. A walking nightmare. A monster.

He scrambles back a hairsbreadth from colliding with the horned hunter, and brings his bow up in an arc to catch the incoming flash of a sword. The wood splinters and cracks in two, the echoes reverberating up his arms.

Will staggers back and feels the cold bite of steel as the second strike connects with soft flesh, carving through his belly. Goring him on tines of bone. He lets out a breathless grunt of pain. Momentum sends Will staggering to hands and knees, gasping in the dirt, the smell of blood and smoke hot in the air. Gritting his teeth, feeling out the jagged gut wound and the agonizing, lingering death it promises. A crown of antlers shifts and blurs above him, and the edge of the blade kisses the thin, breakable skin at the hollow of his throat, forcing his head to tilt up, and up—

The horned thing grins at him with blood dripping from its mouth, thick and viscous as pitch, and raises the sword to finish him off—

"Don't touch him!" Abigail screams. Will doesn't see which direction she darts out of the undergrowth to drive her hunting knife into its back, but he watches the horned hunter stumble, hears the sharp, surprised intake of breath. The churning bloody river floods its banks, washes past him in a cloying wave that turns the dirt under his palms to thick, coppery mud.

Will tries to push himself to his feet, one arm wrapped around his middle, but the ground is slick and unsteady, eroding away, and every inch is a lancing cold agony. He's spalling, fracturing, life leeching from his body at a gallop and then a stumble. The horned hunter finds his his feet first, Abigail tucked against his chest, so small, her knife in his hand—

"No," Will pushes all the air from his lungs in a ragged, animal snarl that rips from his throat. "No, n-no, *don't*—"

"Brave girl," the horned thing says in a man's soft voice, cool and clipped and incongruous with the smoke and horror and carnage. "Is she yours?"

The hunter's visage swims and shifts and blurs, a snake and a lion and a stag and a bloodsoaked, snarling mirror image of Will himself, but that voice registers with sharp, absolute clarity. It’s the only thing he knows he remembers.

"You should be very proud," he says, gently, as Will pushes past the limits of his broken body to try and lunge forward—

"Dad!"

—And watches him cut her throat.

The little knife clatters to the dirt and stays there, just out of reach. In a parting gesture that’s almost polite, the horned hunter lets his daughter fall directly into Will's outstretched arms. He leaves them tangled together on the blood-soaked ground, conjoined. Rattling breath in and choking sob out, shallower and shallower, and faltering, and—

—The water pulls him under, and she's gone.

Will blinks awake in his bedroll, sour sweat pooling in the hollow of his throat, pasting his nightshirt to his back. The cold air prickles at him like knives over the skin and before he's left sleep behind he's already shivering hard enough to hear his teeth chatter.

He glances across the tent and sees Matthew lying awake and still and silent in his own bedroll, watching Will's chest rise and fall in the dark with fascination in his unblinking eyes. No reaction to being caught out but to tilt his cheek into his hand and smile, whisper-thin.

Will swallows and rolls away onto his other side.

Chapter End Notes

listen of COURSE Will and Margot hooking up was not a great win for lesbian representation but I do still love their rapport. Just a couple of pals having a drink together between attempted homicides

I also love Hannibal having a symbolic monstrous aspect but since depicting and outright naming the Anishinaabe creature used in the show is considered Unwise (and I also think horror has a tendency to misrepresent indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices as though Native Automatically Equals Spooky) I did want to take a different tack! Going for more of a Wild Hunt vibe yaknow?

Ah Matthew Brown. Having a fanboy sucks!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

content warnings: explicit sexual content, canon-typical depictions of violence, injury and death

YES I am dipping my toe into the Will/Matthew Brown but for reasons that will quickly become clear the scope of that dynamic made me hesitant to add the relationship tag officially, since I assume people in there are likely to be looking for something a little more central. It's also a sex scene where both participants, while consenting, are not equally *enthusiastic* about being involved, so if that's enough to make it something you'd rather skip proceed directly from "What are friends for?" to the end of the section, pass go, collect $200!

This is also the 'shit pops off' chapter...getting to that plot oooh babey....ok that's what I have to say enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They arrive at Ravenstag two days behind the Vergers and their entourage and approach from the opposite direction for good measure. The walls are high but the gates stand open, the mouth of the citadel yawning wide and undiscerning. They walk through unchecked, two strangers in a town whose borders are swelled to bursting with hundreds of new arrivals equally as unremarkable. Approaching the inner wards and the keep itself would be considerably harder, but Will has every hope that there will be no need. He may be a hunting hound, but he was a fisherman first. Find the right angle, sit patiently, and prey comes to him.

Matthew's inclination seems to tend the opposite way. His eager eyes search out every ridge of stone that makes up the curtain walls, trace over bulwarks and towers. He reaches out to brush a curious touch against the fortifications as they wander by on the way toward the tournament grounds.

"Don't draw attention," Will says under his breath, sullen.

Matthew grins and lifts his hand away from the stones, stepping back and closer to Will's side. "Nobody notices me," he promises in his soft, snide voice. "I'm unremarkable like that. Not even you, not until I wanted to be noticed. You should be more careful letting Lady Margot sneak into your rooms after dark, you know, people might talk."

"People should find something more interesting to talk about instead of wasting their time on me."

Matthew's thin arm slides around his back, hand resting companionably on his shoulder. "Oh, but I think you're *very* interesting, Will," he croons. He ducks even closer, presses a kiss to the side of Will's face and laughs when he flinches. "You know what they call you, the men in the barracks?"

Will grits his teeth. "I do."

"Lord Mason's *Mad Dog*," he says with an unsettling fondness. "Not where Captain Crawford can hear, of course, but they still say it. They have all kinds of rumors. Your mother was a witch and your father was a direwolf, you speak to the dead, you read men's thoughts, you drink their blood and eat their hearts raw—"

"What is it," Will says, sharply, "That you *want* from me, Matthew?"

Matthew's smirk softens and he clasps Will's face in his hands, thumbs caressing the apples of his cheeks. An overly familiar, tender touch, but his eyes are still focused and calculating. "They don't understand you. I think I do. I think we understand each other very well." He lets Will go and winks. "We're hawks, Mister Graham, in a world of sparrows. We have to stick together."

The phantom of his hands on Will's skin prickles and stings like an abrasion, and all at once the press of the crowded street around them is choking and far too close. "Hawks are solitary."

He steps away and Matthew grabs, lightning-fast, at the sleeve of his tunic, tugging him in again. Jerking his lead. "Sure. And that makes them weak." It's a strange relief to see him finally act on the quiet violence that simmers close under his skin. It's more honest than anything he's seen before now. The smug smile is dimmed in his face as he leans into Will's ear. "You know what happens to a dog that bites the hand that feeds it? Stops getting fed *real* fast. Let me be your friend, Will. It's better for your appetite."

Will gutted the last man to call him friend. Friendship was always a dim, distant star, even before he wandered out of its sphere entirely. He and Matthew are probably the same in that regard.

A hundred strangers bustle past every second, going about their mundane lives, not sparing either of them a second glance. Understanding blossoms gradually. Will reaches out to grasp the hand clinging to his sleeve and nods. "You're right. Friend."

Matthew grins, sharp and white. "Good."

Will turns his face away to the place where the pennants and scaffolding of the tournament stands rise above the thatched rooftops. "You asked for this job because you're ready to be noticed," he discerns. "Tired of being unremarkable. Working with an established mercenary might gain you a little notoriety by proxy, but I can do you one better."

Matthew’s tongue darts out to wet his lips, considering, tasting. "Oh?"

"I'll circle the big game and pin it down," he explains, "And *you* go for the throat."

Matthew laughs, a bright happy burst of sound, and promptly drags Will into another sloppy, one-sided kiss, this one firm on the mouth. Will wrestles the urge to recoil and smiles thinly. Playing nice.

Birds of a feather. It's a ridiculous thought when he steps back to examine their plumage side by side. Dispatching one noble at the behest of another noble — even an infamous one — it all makes no difference to Will in the end. Will is an object, a weapon, a killing tool to be fletched and notched and set loose in the right direction. He's not making a *career*. This is purgatory. He's doing what he was kept alive to do. Mechanical, rote, and unceasing, until the machinery breaks down or the world miraculously runs out of men with a price on their heads.

There's precious little he could really admit to *wanting*, truly, except—

The thought arrives in his head like a bolt of lightning from a clear sky: Somewhere in this citadel is the man who marched with Lord Lecter's army, who murdered Abigail, who carved his mark into Will and left him to die. Even now they are walking under the same stars. Breathing the same air.

Will's hand brushes against the knife tucked into his belt. He feels, momentarily, a little less like a walking shade.

He wants a *reckoning*.

Horns trumpet through the streets as half a dozen noble entourages revel in staggered succession. The crowded swell of the town bustles and roars and gambles and toasts and brawls. Will and Matthew make their plans.

They take dinner at an overcrowded inn, divide up Pazzi's stolen armor between them — the helm and leathers to Matthew and the mail shirt and vambraces to Will. Just enough to scrape by as roving guards from some faction or other. To move unnoticed where they need to go. Nothing to link them to Verger, either, unless someone gets an eyeful of the mark he branded into Will's skin, but that's easy enough to keep hidden.

Business talk completed, another problem rears its head. Matthew's touches are lingering, simmering with intent, a lascivious edge to his admiration. Will is prickly and years out of practice with any means of influence besides violence, but he can read between the lines. It's only a matter of time before he's propositioned outright.

It's a tiresome thought, but one Will suspects he can use. Let him get his end away, keep him happy, and he'll be less likely to protest when Will leaves him the Lord and slips away to track his own quarry.

"Wi-ill," Matthew sighs, sing-song, when the candles burn low. His hand falls to rest on the inside of Will's knee. "Don't you ever relax? Let me help you relax. I'll make it good for you." Hungry, waiting, watching for an answer.

Will lets his legs fall open wider in wordless acquiescence, eyes half-lidded, and tips back the rest of his flagon in one long pull. "What are friends for?"

It's easy to make himself pliant and agreeable with his limbs loose and heavy and mead sweet on his tongue. Matthew drapes his weight against Will's side on the narrow straw-tick bed, slings an arm over his waist and traces biting kisses over the nape of his neck.

"Wonder what they'll call me," he murmurs, hitching his hips to press against Will's backside in a slow, lush grind. "I hope it's a good name. Something — ah, something pithy."

"Better than Mad Dog." Will sighs and shuts his eyes. Loses himself to the bleed of sensation, lips and teeth and tongue tracing over his shoulders, fingers curled into the divot of his hip to tug him closer.

Matthew laughs, soft, warm breath at the side of his neck where the pulse jumps. Slides his hand down the curve of a hip to cajole his thighs into a closer press and fuck between them, slick with sweat and spit and his own eagerness. He makes a low, gravely sound of pleasure in his throat.

"When I kill Lord Lecter," he breathes, ragged, "Maybe I'll get his name. Take his power. Become the Butcher of Ravenstag."

His pace quickens and he fucks deep and hard, cockhead dragging along Will's perineum, nudging at his balls, hands holding him in place with a bruising grip. A thready, tenuous arousal simmers low in his stomach, distant and undemanding. More echo than answer. Will licks his lips and lets his head fall back onto the sell-sword's shoulder. "Only if you eat him."

Another peal of laughter dissolves into a throaty moan. Matthew sucks a bruise into his skin and nips at the tender, stinging mark. He shifts his hand from Will's hip to reach around and stroke him root to

tip, and Will opens his eyes to shrug him off and tell him not to bother when he looks up and feels the breath shocked out of him.

Spooling out of the dark shadows of the room, dripping viscous blood and river water over the floor in crimson rivulets, he sees his monster. The horned hunter, dark-eyed and scarlet-mouthed, crown of antlers stretching into the night.

Will feels his eyes go wide and a pulse of searing heat erupts in his belly, sends a scattering burst of sparks all through his chest. His back arches and he thrusts helplessly into Matthew's tight-curled grip, choking back a helpless moan. The nightmare creature tilts an antlered head at him, an expression of dark fascination plain on its bloodstained face. Lifts a single finger to trace over the silver curve of the scar on his stomach, hovering over the skin without touching.

Abruptly, Will goes from pliable and aloof to lock-kneed, trembling, dizzy with sensation, body singing like Damascus steel under the strike of a hammer. Grasping at the cotton sheets and muffling open-mouthed gasps into the pillow. Matthew murmurs some kind of bawdy encouragement but Will barely hears it, eyes fixed on the flickering shadow, blood burning, heart pounding.

He can't say where it comes from, this sudden burst of exhilaration — adrenaline, fear, loathing, something dark and tangled and twisted the wrong way in his head — it's difficult to concentrate long enough to care. His cock twitches and his breath hitches and by the time Matthew is moaning and spilling between his thighs he's already tipping over the precipice into a shuddering fall. Splintering to pieces. Drowning, maybe.

The monster watches him shake apart and smiles.

Will's mouth is dry as a bone and his chest heaves as he fights for breath. When he blinks the sweat from his eyes, the shadows are as empty as before.

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Steel clashes and rings and hooves pound in the distance, but the tents at the edge of the tournament grounds are quiet and near deserted. Cheers and applause drift across the lists as knights tilt and lances splinter — Will pays the festivities no mind. He paces around the edges of each tent and stall, marks each house's colors and flags, until he finds the twisting serpent of the Lecter seal. The Lord takes up arms in his own hastilude, it seems. Margot did call him strange.

Matthew traces his fingers over the canvas with a crooked smile. He turns back to Will. "Kiss for luck?"

Will raises a brow, nonplussed. "Earn it, and we'll talk."

That wins him a breathy laugh and a shrug of dismissal as he ducks inside. Will backs away and leaves him to his ambush.

He leans against a beam and watches the faces of the champions as they march past. Armor gleaming in the sun, colors bright and swords and lances blunted. Toy soldiers at their war games.

"I've never seen a tourney up close before," Abigail chimes, sauntering over to his side.

"Staged sword fights are, uh, less fun after you've been on the business end of the real thing."

She rolls her eyes. There's a candy apple clutched in her hands and an excited gleam in her eye. Hair braided back in a fishtail, face clear and bright. "You're only saying that because you'd lose. *I* still know how to have fun. Is there an archery contest? Bet you I could outshoot any of them."

Will's lip twitches in a flicker of a smile. "Really?"

"I am a good shot," she protests.

"And humble, too."

"Shut up." She elbows him, and he nearly feels it, an echo of an echo of something long gone. His throat goes tight and he looks away. "Which one are you searching for?"

"I'll know him when I see him," Will says, a hard note creeping into his voice. His hand drifts along the side of his belt where he keeps the knife close and sharp.

Abigail hums. "Hoping for a rematch?"

"Something like that."

He blinks, wondering if this will be where she slips away again, but when his eyes drift open she's still beside him, face drawn a little more solemn. "Listen, Will… " she begins, hesitant, and then stops. Her sea-glass eyes widen and her head tilts to the side. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Will frowns, but then he does, too.

The words themselves are indistinct, layered under half a dozen louder and closer voices, but the timbre breaks through with chilling clarity. Smooth, even, placid tones, clipped and precise at the edges. He steps out of the shadow of the tent and turns toward the familiar voice. And there he is, not thirty feet away, stepped out of Will’s dreams to walk the world of the living. The horned hunter with his antlered crown shed and his face washed clean of its mask of gore, helmet in hand and gambeson half-buckled, turned aside to speak congenially with one of the knights. A gloved hand rises to brace him on the shoulder, a bow exchanged — of the pair, the knight bows much lower, deferential — and then the figment of his nightmares made flesh turns and vanishes into the same tent where Matthew is lying in wait. Alone and unarmed.

Will stares across the distance, heart pounding hard enough to feel it in his throat, every hair on the bruised nape of his neck standing on end.

Abigail's fingers hover over her throat, adjusting her scarf. "It's him," she says in a hoarse whisper. "Lord Hannibal. It was him all along."

Will nods numbly.

"What are you gonna do?"

He stares a moment longer at the wall of painted canvas, then moves before he registers that the decision has been made. It's automatic, pure parasympathetic reflex that carries him forward and expects his feet to stay underneath him long enough to catch up. Will pushes past one knight and ducks around another, bends to snatch up a crossbow lying propped against a barrel where some guard left it unattended. Loads a bolt into it without breaking stride, raises it to the level of his chin and kicks aside the tent flap and—

Matthew glances up when he enters. His eyes are shining bright and blown with adrenaline, mouth wide in a curving smile. Blood smeared over the collar of his tunic, not his own.

Lord Lecter, on his knees with Matthew's arm locked around his throat, doesn't look at Will directly, his eyes gone hazy and unfocused. Silver-blonde hair falls over his forehead, blood drips sluggish from a cut in his temple, his hands fumble for leverage over the dagger tucked beneath his chin.

—Will takes aim and lets off his shot.

Matthew makes a shocked, affronted noise as the bolt buries itself to the fletching in his heart. The dagger pulls quickly to the side with a crimson spray as Will lowers the crossbow and registers that he's been holding his breath for far too long. His head spins when he finally exhales.

The sound of a second rattling gasp mingles with his. Will drops the crossbow to the ground and watches Lord Lecter let out a bubbling rasp of a sound. There's blood blossoming from his partly slit throat, efflux from the opened vein pooling in the dirt, and he can't manage to grasp firmly enough at the wound with his own hands, half-conscious and dazed. He's quieter than Abigail was as she choked and bled out. No pain or fear on his pallid face, only a gaunt tenacity. Fighting for every threadbare inhale.

Will licks his lips and steps closer. Kneels over him. Rests a palm over Lecter's neck and pinches the wound shut himself, blood tacky and bright between his fingers. He watches his hands move with a distant fascination.

Lord Lecter's hazy eyes trace over his face without any particular sign of recognition as he draws another shallow, shaking gasp, and then another. Matthew’s body is slumped against a pole a foot away, eyes wide and flat and empty. Unseeing, both of them. But Will's vision is clear and focused. And he sees an *opportunity*.

He sets his jaw, takes a breath, and shouts for help.

Chapter End Notes

will rn: grr seething grief and guilt, killing and violence and vengeance and blood and killing and violence
hannibal rn: concussed, staring at a beautiful blood-spattered man, the beach boys "our prayer" fucking BLASTING in the background,

EDIT: WAIT i just remembered i ALSO have to include this joke -- will, hallucinating a monstrous vision mid-sexual encounter and getting rock hard off pure psychosexual homoerotic adrenaline: he activated my suck or fuck response

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> yes I have an update schedule and yes I am electing to ignore it because I'm facing down a section of storyboarding that I want to put off for another day in favor of impulsively dropping another chapter half a week early. I am just a sim and impatience is one of my core traits!
>
> no chapter-specific content warnings that come to mind in this one, but I DO get to roll out the red carpet for some New Characters! New Characters Alert! I'm a sucker for an ensemble cast and NBC Hannibal does have a pretty good one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

House Lecter's guards do Will the courtesy not to bind his hands, but he knows better than to assume he is not under some kind of custody, a strange man in stolen armor kneeling over a dead assassin and a half-dead nobleman, red hands wrapped tight around his neck. He's led by the elbow away from the tent and the physician and the dozens of swarming onlookers and beyond the inner ward of the citadel, into the sprawling stone keep itself and finally a small, comfortable chamber with a door that bars from the outside. Not a dungeon cell, at least. Small mercies.

Will waits. He sits with his back to the wall and his eyes shut and lulls his heart to a slower tempo with the calming pull of the quiet stream. His hands rest in his lap, stained red up to the wrist. His mouth is sour with the taste of copper and sweat.

The sun curves past its zenith and dips nearly below the peaks of the surrounding hills before one of the guards outside the door opens it again.

She stares at Will, taking the measure of him, arms crossed, and then sets down a ewer of water and a clean set of clothes. "Who are you?"

"Will," he says. His voice comes out hoarse. His throat is dry.

She blinks and offers, "Beverly Katz," and hesitates a moment more before adding, "That armor you're wearing, it doesn't belong to you, right? The way it fits. Probably made for someone broader and taller."

Will shrugs, which is an answer in itself.

"You saved Lord Lecter's life," Beverly informs him. "Did you know that?"

"Is that who he is."

She snorts, amused, tilting her chin at him. "Come on, wash up. He's asking for you."

Will takes a slow, deliberate breath, pushing himself to his feet. The leap is already behind him. It will be an easy drop from here, or a much longer one with a much more swift and decisive landing. All he can do is brace himself and fall.

Beverly whistles low when he steps out to follow her, washed and dressed in the soft white cotton tunic she gave him. "You clean up nice," she murmurs, with a raised brow and a wry smile.

He ducks his head to avoid her eyes and huffs out a weak laugh.

Ravenstag is huge and dark and beautiful from the inside, full of ornate trimmings and enormous hanging tapestries and inlaid mosaic. Iron, silver, scarlet, gold, lapis, mother-of-pearl all gilded in the golden sun through the high vaulted windows. Will wonders how much dirt and snowmelt and abattoir grime he's tracked across the polished stone already.

Other eyes follow him as Beverly leads the way down a wide corridor and up another flight of stairs. Some passing glances and some open stares. Will is more accustomed to watching passers-by turn away and pretend not to see him skulking by. To whispers behind his back. They'll stare much longer and whisper much louder if he's caught and executed, he thinks, and tries to put the itching sensation of being observed out of mind entirely.

Another pair of guards wait posted outside the door to the solar, one short and silver-haired and the other gangly and grim, regarding Will with a flat, wary gaze. He offers a sympathetic twist of his mouth as one and then the other step aside in tandem to let them pass.

"—Mixed with an extract of valerian," one of the men inside drawls, "So you'll be drifting off to sleep in short order, where I hope you'll dream sweet dreams of narrow escapes from the clutches of the grave. Rest is the best medicine, m'Lord, and replenishing lost blood. And thanking your lucky stars the knife didn't manage to do more than nick your windpipe. I’m a physician, not a miracle worker."

"I have been very fortunate all around, it seems."

Will nearly shivers at the rumble of his voice, so soft and cool, even knowing now to anticipate it. Familiar like a thin blade, caught between his ribs for so long that his body has given in and healed around the intrusion, kept it there to make him bleed inwardly with every breath.

There's a lethargy to Lecter's face and a bandage over the wound on his neck, so the first impression is one of benign lassitude. A sleeping lion. Stripped of even the inadequate half-armor he wore on the tournament grounds. Only an injured man with a collection of small cuts and bruises marring the sharp planes of his aristocratic face.

"My thanks for your pains, Abel," he says with a half-smile that turns on Beverly and Will and broadens. "And I would be remiss not to extend some gratitude to my rescuer as well," he adds, transitioning his attention seamlessly.

Will smiles thinly and tilts his head in a stiff bow. "Like the physician said," he rasps. "Lucky stars. I was in the right place at the right time."

He has, not for the first time today or even in the last five minutes, the feeling of being carefully weighed and measured in a roving glance. Lord Lecter's eyes are sharper than the rest, dark and intense, reaching beneath the surface to flay open his skin and catalog the beats of his heart, pry apart his skull and examine the lobes of his brain. If he remembers carving open Will's belly with a steel blade and leaving him for dead he gives no sign of it, but then he does not display any real expression that might reveal what conclusions he has come to.

"Won't you introduce us, Miss Katz?" he says aside to the guard standing at Will's shoulder.

Beverly cocks a hand on her hip. "He didn't give me much to work with," she warns with a long-suffering tilt of her head. "Hannibal Lecter, eighth of his name, Lord Paramount of Ravenstag," she says, and then, flatly, "This is Will."

"Only Will?"

"Will Graham," another voice interjects with an unmistakable fondness. Belatedly Will breaks away from his locked stare-down with the man in the bed to realize that one of the other figures in the room is beaming at him with a face he's seen before. "I almost didn't recognize you without half a dozen dogs trailing at your heels," she says, striding forward to clasp one of his hands between her own.

Five years distance has made Lady Bloom no less lovely, vibrant and sweet and serene. She floats across the floor and her smile is like starlight. In another life, Will remembers being very much in love with her.

In this life, here, his heart is too corroded and knotted over with scar tissue to do more than twinge faintly in his chest with the echo of a distant feeling. He ducks his head, and kisses the hand resting in his. "Hello, Alana."

"Lord Hannibal is an old friend," she explains. "He stayed at my family's court in Port Haven when I was a girl. And Will—" she offers, in turn, "Was a huntsman and kennelmaster there for a time, years ago now. It feels almost like fate to see the two of you finally cross paths."

"Perhaps we were always destined to meet, then. Moving in overlapping spheres." Lecter's eyes are crinkled at the edges with amusement. "Some of our stars are the same."

Will looks away. "My sphere is, ah, too low for any consideration of destiny, Your Lordship. I travel. I meet a lot of people."

The ineffable sliver of a smile does not falter. "Of course. And you must swoop in in borrowed armor to deliver a great many strangers from mortal peril in these travels of yours. A regular knight-errant."

Will bristles, ducking his chin low and staring fixedly down at his feet.

"You *are* beginning to make a habit of it. Twice is not a pattern, but it's very close," Alana says in an indulgent tone. Will feels his stomach drop as he catches her meaning. "Has anyone sent for Abigail yet? Or have we left the poor girl on her own to wander the lower town wondering where on earth you've disappeared to? She must have shot up like a weed since last I laid eyes on her. Nineteen, now? Or twenty?"

The ground dissolves briefly under Will's feet and blood rushes in his ears in a crashing wave. He opens his mouth and shuts it, then drags his eyes up from the floor to her earnest, open face, feeling newly gutted all over again in a tense instant. "She," he starts, exhales. "She didn't come with me."

Alana searches his expression, wise enough to hear the strained grief thick in his voice, and the light in her face dims. "Oh, *Will*."

"She died," he admits in a rough rasp. "Three years ago this spring. A lung fever." His eyes flicker unconsciously back to Lord Lecter. Wondering if he spots the place where equivocation turns to falsehood. "There's no one to send for. I'm here on my own."

Too many strangers' solemn faces turn his way, lined with unwanted pity, so it's almost a relief when one only crosses her arms and asks, "Here for what purpose, exactly?"

Alana's mouth goes tight. "Freddie, please…."

The small woman with the shock of red curls looks Will over frankly. "That armor wasn't just borrowed, I'd bet it was stolen. You needed it to wander behind the lists during the joust where you weren't meant to be. I'm only clarifying a point, because it *is* very lucky that you were — what did you call it? *In the right place at the right time*. Suspiciously lucky."

Lord Lecter's mouth twitches in a flickering smile, wide enough to open a split in his lip. "Apologies, Will. Miss Lounds is my spymaster, you understand. I'm afraid she's quite thorough."

"It's my job to ask questions, Mister Graham," she says, and stares him down with a challenge writ into the arch of her brows.

Will has built up a greater tolerance for having his boundaries overstepped in the past several years. He builds his own forts deep inside, past the layers of toppled, crumbled walls, keeps everything important safe behind them. He doesn't curl his lip at her, only sighs and glances sidelong at Alana with a feigned sheepish resignation coloring his cheeks. "The truth is not very noble or valiant," he says, contrite. "I was there on business."

Lecter's half-moon smile doesn't waver, though his hands fold in the blankets and furs in his lap. "Ah. Not a knight-errant at all. You are a different kind of huntsman nowadays," he guesses.

Alana's brow creases. Beverly frowns. Will inclines his head in a motion halfway between a nod and a bow. "One who deals in bounties, my Lord. I'm sorry I didn't corner my quarry fast enough to spare you an injury." He feels his pulse keep steady and slow, carefully blending the truth and the falsehood. Winding together a lure. "And sorry that I robbed you of your retribution by killing him myself."

A thin, warm wisp of a chuckle bursts from Hannibal Lecter and his eyes are briefly alight with a shine of amusement. "It was rather rudely done, Will. But I appreciate your apology."

Alana's face holds much less warmth and fondness than a minute ago. She looks at him now with a hurt wariness. "You're—"

"A mercenary," he explains flatly, and offers her a narrow, sad smile. Her lips press together in a hard white line. "Money was tight. Circumstances changed."

"Who hired you?" Freddie Lounds asks. "To assassinate that assassin?"

The narrow smile tightens. "I don't disclose my patronage. Bad for business."

Beside him, Beverly hums. "Didn't think mercenaries were generally known for their loyalty."

"Loyalty?" Will clarifies. "No. But discretion, sure. At least the ones worth hiring twice." He squares his shoulders, keeps his head high but does not meet their eyes. "I won't pretend the work I do is honorable or chivalrous, but I like to think I do it well."

"A consummate professional," Lecter says with the same twinkle in his eye. "And saving my life, was that a part of the agreement as well?"

Will's tongue flicks against his dry lips and he grimaces. "Ah, not exactly. Might have borrowed trouble there."

Lecter tilts his head to the side, considering, and the stark white of his bandaged throat stands out against the dark velvet drapings of the canopy. Will remembers the fluttering tremor of that pulse

beneath his hands, struggling like a small fragile-boned bird out of the nest. Left whole and unbroken, but marked by his touch. "Then you must allow me to repay you properly for your good work, Will Graham. Stay for dinner."

※

"My father already taught me to hunt," Abigail says, looking over the pole in her hands with an indifferent curiosity. She's not given easily to accepting gifts and Will doesn't quite know how to offer them, only that he wants to try so badly it threatens to burst out of him like a swallow trapped in the cage of his ribs.

"I know." He winds another knot around the colorful thatch of down and elk fur that hides the hook. "You're a good hunter. But it's not the same as fishing."

"Then don't act like it's the same. You can't take his place just because you killed him," she retorts, but there's little tooth to the words. The first time she spoke them they were dagger-sharp and barbed and tore deep under his skin, but by now they're more of an old refrain. A reminder neither of them heeds as well as they should. "Maybe I don't want to learn to fish."

Will smiles, thin and weary, and shrugs. "Maybe not. It's your choice."

They sit in their strange, familiar silence, listening to the ripple of the stream. Two strays circling one another warily and then settling in back to back, a little warmer for the companionship.

Abigail kicks her bare feet in the water and hums. "Show me how to cast," she concedes, after a little while. "Then we'll see."

Will's jaw clicks with the effort of suppressing a grin. Obedient, he wades in up to the knee, demonstrates the motion and angle and points out the best spots to aim for. She twirls her long hair around a finger and shifts forward to watch, careful and quiet. Studious and attentive and sharp as a knife. Delight flickers across her face when a perch jumps out of the current by Will's foot and startles them both with a sudden splash.

"The last thing," he explains, wiping the spray from his cheek and smiling broadly. "Is just a superstition, but—" he shuts his eyes, casts the line into the still, deep water in the head of a run. "I was always taught to name the bait."

Abigail watches the line sink and looks back to him with wide, searching eyes. "What do you name it after?"

Will hesitates and then reaches up to scratch at the hair curling over the nape of his neck, staring into the water. "Ah, family. Someone you cherish, is how the tradition goes. If they cherish you back, you hook the fish."

She looks at him a while longer, face drawn into careful blankness, but her eyes are a quiet storm.

Will clears his throat, tries to keep turned away, and his vision swims with the effort. "There's a kind of truth to it," he says quietly. "Lots of superstitions have a little kernel of logic at the center. It helps to remember what you're casting for. You cast the bait to catch the fish to put the food in your belly and live. The bait's an exchange. It's an homage to that life you want to preserve."

Abigail smiles a thin, crooked smile. "My life, I guess, if you're dedicating your catch to me."

Will glances at her over his shoulder and sets his jaw. "You're important, Abigail," he says plainly.

She smiles wider and sits back on her elbows in the tall grass. "Well, then, prove it," she challenges. "Catch me a fish."

※

Will makes it most of the way to dinner before stopping to wonder, momentarily, what game he thinks he's playing at. The moment of deliberation turns into a span of several more, and the urge to turn tail and run starts to seem more and more like the most promising option available.

"You found the right door," Beverly says pointedly when she finds him lingering outside the entrance to the Great Hall. "In case that's what has you worried."

He stares down the open door, listening to the faint sounds of music and conversation beyond. "I'm not worried," he lies.

"Definitely not relaxed, though. Like someone dumped sand down the back of your shirt, is how I would describe the look on your face right now."

Will offers her a strained half-smile. "I'm not usually obliged to be this, uh, sociable," he explains, fiddling with the cuffs of his sleeves. The empty side of his belt where his dagger usually hangs puts him off balance. He trimmed back his beard and the wildest snarls of his hair for the occasion.

"You can handle the guts, but not the glory?" Beverly pats him kindly on the arm. "Just sit back and let them applaud if they want to. Smile and nod. Nothing to it."

Will hums and stares a little longer at the threshold to the hall, before he decides he might as well take this leap too.

It's a busy hall, the tumult of guests gathering for another in a long week of feasts. Easy to move through without drawing too much attention. But not, apparently, to go unseen.

"Good Will," the growing familiar voice calls, only a little above a whisper and still clear as a ship's bell. Will's feet falter and he turns to the high table, where Lord Lecter is seated and offering a private smile that shows more in the corners of his eyes than the turn of his mouth. A heavy vair fur draped over his shoulders. A high collar that hides the white of the bandage at his throat. Regal and poised, gesturing Will to approach with a nearly imperceptible nod.

He means, Will realizes, to seat a common sellsword directly at his left side, in full view of all the assembled mesne lords. Will stares at the empty chair and at the nobleman, whose dark eyes crinkle further in silent mirth. *Strange*, Margot called him. It's true enough but wholly inadequate. *Non compos mentis* is more like it. Will doesn't know what he expected. He sighs a sound that's half a scoff and half a dark laugh and slides into the place of honor.

"You are too generous with your hospitality, my Lord." Skepticism makes the words fall flat and terse.

"The best fault I could hope to be accused of." Lecter lifts a goblet of wine to his soft-smiling mouth. "I would be grateful if you would indulge me a little more of that sin."
Heads are angled in the direction of the high table, at the motley stranger seated amongst the Lord and his council. From the far side of the room, Lord Verger's thundercloud-heavy eyes burn on the back of his neck. Will prickles and tries not to feel it.

"Eat, Will," Lecter suggests with a convivial nod. "Please. Good food is meant to be enjoyed in good company."

The focus of his attention is unsettlingly direct, sharp and keen. Like a carrion bird circling, anticipating the dive. They do call him *Vulture* for good reason. And *Butcher*. Will's eyes wander as he fills his trencher, until they settle in the direction of the untouched platter directly in front of Lecter. Dark meat and savory sauce and fat round mushrooms seasoned with green herbs. Deviled kidneys.

Lord Lecter follows his gaze and his smile widens, for the first time sharp enough to echo the memory of the horned hunter in the forest outside Wolf Trap, crimson with blood and soot. He arranges a mouthful of the meat over a corner of a crust of bread and sinks his teeth in with an expression of quiet satisfaction. Savors the taste in a way that wordlessly confirms the provenance of the offal in an instant. Technically Will himself is the butcher on this occasion.

An auspicious send-off for Matthew, he thinks darkly, to leave a good taste in someone's mouth for a change.

"Is there any particular foible of yours," Lord Lecter asks, "That I might indulge in return, while I have your company?"

Will laughs, shocked into it by the absurdity of the question, from a man happily feasting on flesh of a vanquished enemy with all of a nobleman's airs and graces. He drinks the sweet, rich wine in his goblet and shakes his head. "Making a study of my character, my Lord?"

"I am trying to," he answers, simply, pinning him down with another lingering look. "You intrigue me, Will. I've been examining you from every angle that I can and yet I sense there are whole facets that remain obscured from my view. I shift the light to catch a better glimpse and it only creates a new shadow."

Will meets his eyes over the rim of his goblet, and holds his gaze, in answer and in challenge. "Keep looking, then," he says, low and inviting. "My Lord is free to puzzle me out until his curiosity is wholly satisfied."

Lips curl around the sharp point of the lure, and as he watches close it sinks in deep, drawing a bead of blood that wells like a glistening red jewel and runs down his chin to his bandaged throat.

Lord Lecter stands and the room falls silent.

"My friends," he announces, a soft placid tone that never rises above a polite, authoritative patter. "We celebrate hard won triumphs and concede brave defeats tonight. I regret that I was indisposed to see the last of the tourney through myself." He ducks his head in a very convincing approximation of modest chagrin. "But as you all can see, I stand before you now quite hale and whole. And for that," he raises his goblet, "I am compelled to credit the quick action of the man beside me. My champion and yours tonight, Will Graham!"

The gathered guests burst into a scattered applause and Will grips tight to the edge of the table, keeps his eyes fixed on a column at the far end of the hall.

"He has already proved himself both capable and courageous. For that reason," he adds with a sidelong smile, "I believe he will make a fine addition, going forward, to my personal guard. Let us drink his health."

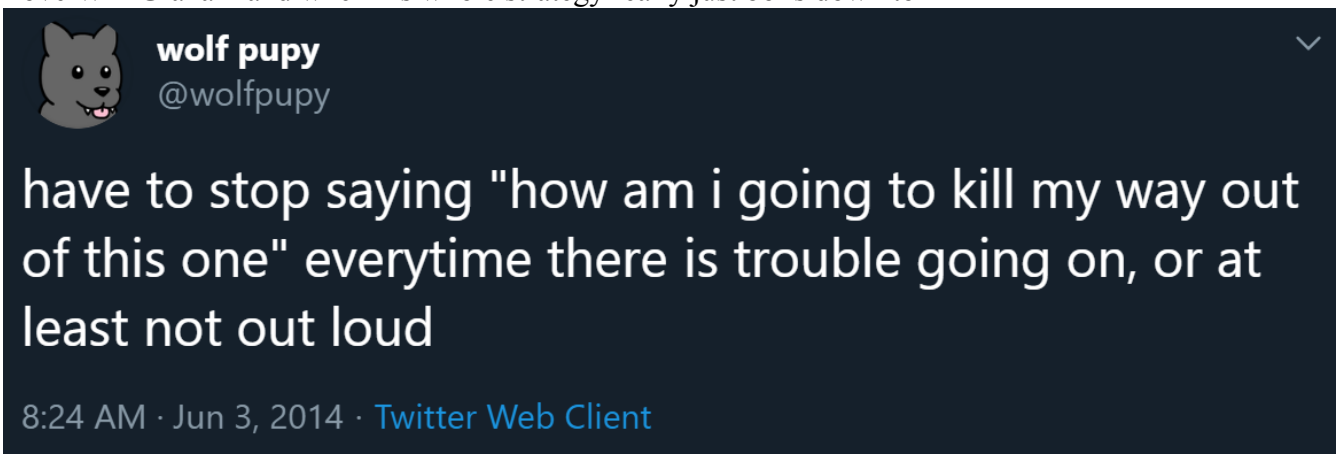
Lecter lifts his chalice in a toast and gestures magnanimously back to Will, who blinks in surprise while the applause erupts again, loud as rolling thunder. He chokes back a shocked burst of laughter. A shockingly audacious move to answer the veiled challenge. A calculated generous offer without chance of refusal, binding him to Ravenstag and to Lecter's side, keeping him close. It's better than Will could have hoped for.

Their eyes meet once again over the silver rim of the goblet. Will breaks into a broad smile, tinged red with wine.

Chapter End Notes

bodyguard au! bodyguard au!! Also thank god Hannibal finally has a speaking role in this fic! Sometimes to reap the rewards of having a character's reputation precede their entrance into the story you gotta wait a long-ass time for them to show up

Love Will Graham and when his whole strategy really just boils down to


wolf pupy
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have to stop saying "how am i going to kill my way out of this one" everytime there is trouble going on, or at least not out loud
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Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

content warnings: a little more Mason-typical verbal and physical abuse ahoy! Sorry to Will Graham but he is like a horse in a plinko to me

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will stays perched on the edge of the cot in his new room as the moon rises silver and cold in the black sky. He sits awake and sharpens his knife. The whirring of the blade under his hands is a tactile comfort, familiar as a heartbeat. There's peace in the slick slide of steel on the whetstone, the hypnotic resonance of the sound singing in his ears.

When Abigail's hunting knife is honed again to a razor edge he sheaths it at his side and turns his face to the door. As if on a cue, it creaks open.

"Carlo," Will greets in a flat, even tone, eyes half-lidded. "Matteo. *Buona sera*."

Neither give him a reply, but Matteo lifts a gloved hand high enough to show the oak cudgeon resting in it. Will sighs and shifts to his feet.

"You have orders, I know. Take me to Lord Verger."

Carlo's dim eyes narrow, but he nods. Matteo bares crooked teeth in a menacing snarl. Better if they don't have to drag him where he's been summoned by force.

Will walks between them in the shadows to the outer ward of the citadel, where streets turn from cobble to gravel and mud. His heart jumps under his ribs, quick and harsh, thrumming under the bone and skin and muscle, tugging at scar tissue. He grits his teeth and sucks in a steadying breath just before they throw open the door to a dilapidated stable just within the outer wall and push him inside.

The air is thick with mildew and old rot and the moonlight drifts in hazy through a small window in the hayloft. Mason, seated on an upturned barrel, rises at his stumbling entrance.

"Will, Will, *Will*," he greets with a cockeyed smile and reaches out to brace him by the shoulders. "What can I say? I mean, where to even *begin*? I'm really at a loss, here."

Will inclines his head. "My Lord."

He feels his neck snap to the side with the force of the backhand before the impact fully registers, the heavy weight of his rings leaving a dull, stinging ache behind. "Bad dog," Mason hisses. The whimsy doesn't leave his voice when the anger enters it. They twine together like honey and venom. "Carlo, put the mongrel on its knees, won't you?"

Will bends before the other can apply any creative, painful pressure to his ankles, big hands shoving at his shoulders. He hopes to get through this with as little torment as possible, but with Lord Verger some amount of pain is compulsory. His shins meet the straw with a bruising thud and Mason waits for a flicker of a wince to show on his face before continuing.

He reaches out and grasps the ridge of Will's jaw in his prying fingers, tilts his chin upward. "I feel like we had a miscommunication here," he croons, "Maybe I wasn't clear enough. What I said was *Kill Hannibal Lecter for me*. But what you did—" Mason leans in close enough to smell the port on his breath and the ever-present slaughterhouse effluvia beneath. "—was doublecross me and make yourself his personal bodyguard. Not the same thing at all. Not even in the *ballpark*, Mister Graham. You see why I'm having a hard time with this?"

"I'm going to kill him," Will grits out, lip curled in a half-swallowed snarl. "Soon. Just not yet."

Mason lets go his face with a huff and steps back, mumbling under his breath with a put-upon air. He rubs a hand over his chin and looks sidelong at Will. "And you, you were under the impression that this arrangement we have is one where you can make that call?" He laughs in a way that conveys no amusement at all. "Do I have to put a shorter leash on you? A muzzle?"

Will glares up at him. "I have to do it right," he rasps. "Take my time."

Mason taps his foot and sighs. "I thought we had a pretty good understanding going, I really did. I'm disappointed." He steeples his fingers, presses them to his lips. "This — this rogue agent, free thinker act, you can't *do* that with me. I *own* you. You're only alive because you're *useful*."

"I know," Will demurs, "I understand. I'll keep being useful. But I need him to suffer." He grits his teeth, inhales— "*Please*."

Lord Verger's brows tilt up and his pale eyes gleam with interest. "Well, well. What did His High And Mighty Lordship do to make you hate him so much?"

Will's face throbs where he was struck and his throat is close and tight like it's being squeezed shut. He looks away and lifts one hand, slowly, to mime a diagonal slash across his belly, tracing the path of the scar beneath.

Mason considers, then bursts into raucous laughter. "Ha! Oh, that is good! That is rich!" He claps his hands together, sudden in the stillness of the empty room. "And that pretty little foundling girl you're always moping about, was it Lecter who killed her too?"

"I'm going to kill him," he repeats in a voice so thick with fury that it sounds distant to his own ears. "Send me back and tell me to finish the job tonight and I will put a blade through his heart before sunrise." He lifts his eyes from the mud and straw to pin Lord Verger in place with a glare. "Or you could tell me to wait and I'll make it worth your while. I'll be useful. I swear it."

Verger's a sadist and a bully. He wants deference and pain and fear, but better than that he wants power. He could have one of his lackeys hold Will down and snap every bone in his hand any time the fancy struck him, but Will understands him well enough to keep offering up the right distraction. The bigger prize. For once something that benefits them both equally.

Will licks his lips. "I want to unmake Lecter," he says. "Take everything he has — the gold and the land and the lordship — strip it all away and make him crawl in the dirt and beg for mercy. And then I want to kill him. With my hands." He exhales, dips his head down in a bow. "Let me have Hannibal and I will deliver you Ravenstag on a silver platter."

Verger eyes him with avarice shining in his face, cold and pale in the moonlight. For the second time in a span of only a few hours Will watches his lure hook a perfect catch. "Lord Paramount," he murmurs. "Mm, I like the sound of that. Like it a lot. And the castle, it's a nice property, good views, roomy. The man has good taste."

"Just say the word," Will says with a flicker of dark amusement, bowing lower. "What are your orders?"

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Morning breaks over the valley, sun gold on the stones of the keep and blinding white on the hills. Will gives his oaths of service in a distant, dreamlike haze, looking down at Lord Lecter's boots on the cold stone cobbles of his courtyard. Kisses his hand and catches the last flash of satisfaction in his noble face as he rises to his feet again, bound by a fealty he has no intention of upholding.

Next, at the gatehouse, Will buckles a shortsword at his belt beside the hunting knife and fastens a cloak pin with his new house's seal over the hidden mark branded into his skin. He dons a new leather brigandine embossed with branching antlers and twining serpents.

"Come on," one of the guards he saw at the entrance to the solar leads him on a tour — Jimmy, the one with the silver hair, not his gangly counterpart Brian, who merely casts a suspicious glance from across the room and marches away in step with Beverly. "Council meeting next! Can't be late. Rude to keep his Lordship waiting."

"Wouldn't want to be *rude*," Will echoes, dry.

Raised voices from the council chamber precede their arrival, the impatient patter of a speaker eager to be heard. A familiar voice, Will thinks, and recognizes Fredericka Lounds's caustic timbre a moment later.

"—If we knew who sent the assassin, but he's not exactly a promising interview subject as a corpse. A few tattoos and other distinguishing marks on the body, but nothing that points back to the source. That leaves the door wide open for another attack from the same corner."

"If at first you don't succeed," the physician chimes in thoughtfully, "Try, try again."

"Forewarned is forearmed, Miss Lounds," Lord Lecter answers. "I intend to bolster my defenses accordingly. Have already begun it, in fact."

Someone taps their nails against a table. Freddie makes an incredulous noise in her throat. "I don't really see how it makes you any safer," she says, "To have a sellsword for a bodyguard. Will Graham is just as likely to stick a knife in your back as he is to stop another assassin from trying it." She glances up with a flat, wary stare as Will enters, then turns away again. "You can't trust him, my Lord."

One wall of the room is a series of high, vaulted arches, light spilling in from the clerestory and painting the floors in refracted gold. A fireplace on the far wall and a mezzanine with a sprawling collection of maps and manuscripts. A long table with Lecter reclining in the central seat, surrounded by a handful of advisors. An iron-wrought stag head mounted on the wall just behind him that gives the impression of a crown of black antlers when viewed from the right angle.

"And yet I find myself perfectly willing to take the gamble," Lecter dismisses. A pleased light gleams in his dark eyes when he looks to Jimmy and Will standing sentry at the door. "What hidden reason do you imagine Mister Graham has to wish me harm?"

Will looks him dead in the face and feels liquid smooth hatred roil in the pit of his stomach. He offers up a lopsided smile and a small, sardonic bow.

"He doesn't *need* one. Yesterday he spared your life," Freddie says flatly, "Tomorrow he might change his mind. For the right price."

Lord Hannibal only looks faintly amused. "Well. Will, you are very welcome to betray me if you receive an offer of appropriate financial compensation," he says archly, reclining in his seat. "I assume you know that I would, of course, have to kill you."

"Of course," Will echoes, deliberately bland. "I'll keep it in mind, my Lord."

"There. You see?" Hannibal turns to his spymaster. "We know where we are with each other. Nothing to worry about."

Freddie scoffs and sits heavily back in her seat. Beside her the physician hums, slouched over with a thoughtful expression on his bearded face. Will thinks again that he knows the man from somewhere. "It is an unconventional arrangement, Sire, you have to admit that. What's your angle? Keep your friends close and your killers-for-hire closer? Takes one to catch one?"

The abstruse smile on Lecter's face widens a little and the light falls across the plane of his cheek sidelong, casting half his face in deeper shadow. "When the snakes slither by close enough to strike at one's heels, Doctor Gideon," he remarks pleasantly, "It becomes a considerable advantage to have a mongoose close at hand."

The remainder of the meeting passes uneventfully in a discussion of the departed vassal lords and their entourages, of grain stores and socage and the trade road to the north closed off for a fortnight by heavy snowfall.

He is not surprised to find a summons rather than a dismissal waiting for him at its conclusion as the advisors break off to go their separate ways. Lecter pours a new goblet of wine from the pitcher on the table and stands, offers the drink up with his same odd, presumptuous hospitality. Little heed for their respective stations in his easy, familiar stance.

Will takes the cup and holds the nobleman in the periphery of his vision, hatred choking in his throat and burning like ice in his blood. And yet intrigued by his strangeness, despite himself.

He turns away and feels the weight of wine-dark eyes tracing over his face. Lingering on one particular plane of it, where a contusion blossoms over the ridge of his cheek. Mostly bruise, a little broken skin where the setting of a signet ring dug in too deep when Mason backhanded him.

He expects Lecter to touch him next, put a hand on his face, angle his chin up for a better view. Press a thumb into the bruise to see if he'll flinch. But he demands nothing more tangible than the lingering gaze, bright with interest. "I broke my fast with Lady Alana this morning. I hoped she could tell me a little more about you."

Will's lips press tight together. His jaw pulses, once, involuntarily.

"You must have expected as much."

"Mmm." He looks into his goblet, through the dark swirl of red and the shine of burnished metal. "Manage to sate your curiosity, my Lord?"

"I did begin to." A wry beat of silence from Lecter. "—Until she intuited my purpose and told me off soundly for invading your privacy."

Will feels his mouth twitch into a smile.

"Still, I believe I have made some progress on my own merits. Shall I list my findings?"

The smile flattens out again. Will glances up and tilts his head in a sharp nod.

Lecter's eyes glint proudly. "Courage. Determination. Intelligence, Will, *remarkable* intelligence, and keen insight most of all. I think there is very little that you do not see when you look for it."

Heat prickles in his face and churns in his stomach. "I don't know what you expect to get out of flattering me," he grumbles.

"Don't you?" Lecter's face goes softly inscrutable and then quickens again into liveliness, leaving the question behind like a dropped pebble. "You have a habit of unconscious mimicry in your posture and in your way of speaking that interests me. Adapting to reflect new patterns. In an uncharitable light it might seem like mockery or manipulation, but I don't believe it's as deliberate as that."

"Nothing I do makes it happen," Will murmurs, softly defensive. "It just happens. I'm… parchment. Everything that brushes me leaves a mark."

"So I see," he agrees with a faint twist of his lips, eyes flickering to the bruise again. He blinks and seems to savor a thought on his tongue for a moment, deliberate and careful. "Good parchment calls for extensive treatment of the skin. It must be well soaked, stretched and scraped to the desired thinness."

"Oh yes," Will agrees a little facetiously, teeth bared. "I'm thin-skinned."

"Very nearly flayed, I imagine. No effective barriers."

Fingertips go numb and bloodless around the stem of the goblet. Will forces any hint of a reaction from his face, but it comes too slow. It looks like a flinch.

Lecter's look has still a catlike quality to it. Will feels the prick of claws in his hide before they slowly retract, knows that it is only a matter of time before they will return to hook in deeper. Knows it, and doesn't fear it. He's not prey. Not anymore.

"Would you tell me, I wonder," he muses in his soft, even voice. "If I asked you who bruised your face?"

"I said before I was borrowing trouble," Will answers and sips his wine coolly. "I took care of it."

Lecter looks away and Will watches him in turn, the light and shadow dappling him at stark angles, the proud jut of his nose and the soft curve of his jaw. Face blank as he considers the admission. "I dragged you into my world," he says at length, more asseveration than apology.

"No, I, uh. Got here on my own." The firm dissent slips between Will's teeth of its own accord.

"Well." A smile dances over the ridges and planes of his smooth, patrician face. "I appreciate the company nevertheless."

Chapter End Notes

OKAY WELL. This rounds out my first major arc! All my setups set up and now I get to tip em over like a bunch of plot dominos...nice plan Will hope nothing goes wrong!

Thanks to the people leaving comments I know a self-indulgent AU where we haven't even gotten around to the porn yet is not everyone's top investment but I TRULY appreciate every response! You light up my life! Now excuse me I gotta get back to drafting out the aforementioned porn for later

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> content warnings: lightly implied animal abuse, and more depictions of violence and death of course of course. I can go max one chapter without at a time but blood IS compulsory, ultimately. More explicitly gory&disturbing imagery and a brief emetophobia warning for the second scene, because one thing about Will Graham is that he will have weird and intense dreams

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will is circling the top of the inner wall on a morning patrol when a stuttering motion registers in the corner of his eye. He stops mid-stride and makes out a flash of fur matted with mud, half-shrouded in a gutter thirty feet below.

He's already drifted away from his post before he's really decided to move, hears Beverly call after him, fuzzy in the predawn haze. "Will?"

He takes the stairs two at a time, unbolts the gate and darts in the direction of the shape that caught his eye. Looks around. Kneels in the slush and whistles, low and soft. The low light and the empty street make no reply, so he tugs the rest of his breakfast of dried meat from a pouch on his belt, whistles again and holds it out. "Come on," he pleads. "Come on, hey, it's alright. You must be hungry."

The dog doesn't make a sound, only pokes its face out from behind the crates and firewood stacked between two of the houses and sniffs. Wet black eyes shine up at him, not quite trusting.

"The hell, Graham?" Beverly chimes in a terse whisper as she catches up behind him. "You took off so fast I thought the whole wall was about to come down."

Will presses a finger to his lips distractedly and bends forward to extend the hand holding the proffered olive branch. The dog cranes its head a little further out of the shadows and then takes a step forward, favoring one paw. Broad mastiff frame, black and russet and muddy white muzzle and chest. He’s never meant to seek out strays, but it's difficult to avoid, somehow. He has an affinity for the lost, the wayward, the wandering. Pulled to him like a tide creeping up the shore. Like recognizing like, more than anything else.

Beverly watches with a furrow in her brow. "It's hurt."

"It is," Will hums under his breath and feels a little of the knot of worry in his chest ease when the mutt takes his offering with a silent, ravenous flash of teeth. He pulls out another bite and extends his palm again. "Hey. Hey, there. It's okay. There's more."

It takes a few minutes more and the rest of the meat in the pouch to win over enough trust for a light scratch behind the ears, then a long, slow, unhurried soothing before he dares to reach for the injured limb. Beverly watches the process in polite silence with her arms folded and her head tilted curiously. Will offers her a thin, distracted smile and palpates the soft pad of the paw. There are half-healed impressions of teeth on the lower foreleg, dried blood matted into fur, a savage bite wound that has only begun to knit together. The dog pulls away but doesn't whine or snap or snarl. Only shrinks back without a sound. "Easy," Will repeats and shrugs off his cloak to bundle the stray up inside. She’s

light in his arms, every rib straining under taut skin. Older scars and patches of mottled fur visible even at a glance. "Is there—" Will says, tucking the animal against his chest. "A kennelmaster? Somewhere I can bring—?"

"Lord Lecter doesn't keep a kennel," Beverly says. "But yeah. I know a guy."

Brian and Jimmy offer matching incredulous stares as they replace their watch on the top of the wall. Beverly shrugs, magnanimous. Will pays almost no heed to anyone but his wounded charge.

"Peter?" Beverly calls, rapping on the lintel as they duck into the stables. One of the stablehands looks up from his work in answer — a small man with a wiry scruff of beard and a deep, old scar high across one temple — and coos. "Sorry to bother you so early, but Will here found—"

His narrow face falls as he reaches out, addressing the animal in Will's arms without his eyes flickering up as far as either of their faces. "Oh, no. No, you sh-shouldn't be back here," Peter stammers in a whispery voice with a quiet lisp. "Not safe."

"You already know this dog?" Beverly says, but Will is already kneeling in the straw, setting his foundling down to watch her stumble into Peter's lap. She presses her cold nose to his face and makes the first sound he's heard from her yet, a soft chuff and a low whine, tail wagging.

"She hurt her leg," he explains, "It’s healing well enough, but she should have someone looking after her. Can you do that, Peter?"

"Not safe for her," the stablehand mumbles again, but his fingers are already sinking into her matted fur, petting and fussing twice as happily as Will had. "He'll try to take her back, make her fight. She doesn't w-want to fight any more. Doesn't like it."

A mordant smile twists Will's mouth and he nods. "I won't let that happen."

Beverly kneels, finally, meets the pair of them on their level and reaches out a hand to let the stray sniff suspiciously at her. "What's her name?"

Peter takes a long time to answer, head tilted a little to the side, throat clicking. "Cavall," he volunteers eventually. "Good dog. She b-bites. But she doesn't mean to, just. Gets scared."

"Just doing what she was trained to do," Will agrees, staring at the ring of thin, patchy fur that winds around the base of Cavall's neck: the mark of a heavy collar worn too tight. Some distant emotion pulses under his skin, hot and sharp. "Who wants to take her back, Peter?" he says. He hears the dangerous calm in his voice.

Beverly frowns at him. Peter's silent for much longer this time, pulling away to grab a shallow basin and a cloth and start washing the mud and blood from Cavall's coat, gentle and methodical. Like he didn't hear Will's question at all.

"C-Can't tell you," he says eventually. "Just someone."

Beverly sits back on her heels, still frowning. "That means one of the knights," she infers. "No law against dog-fighting or bear-baiting, Will, especially not if a nobleman is sponsoring it."

"I know." Will rasps, "I just--"

"You can't start making enemies before you've been here a fortnight, yeah? I like you too much to lose you to some overblown chivalric trial by combat over a dog."

"A good dog," Peter echoes, as Cavall swipes her tongue over his cheek and shakes the water off her back.

"I'll stay out of trouble," Will agrees, like the promise is a tooth pried out of his jaw. "But we should still find a place for Cavall to stay. A home. This girl's been through enough, hasn't she?"

Beverly sighs. "If we can."

Will hears the shuffle of skirts and quick footsteps, but mostly registers the moment when they stop. Beverly stands to attention and Peter keeps his eyes low, but Will stays right where he is, a smile catching him by the corner of the mouth. "Lady Alana."

He can hear the answering grin in her voice. "I might have known. Who's this?"

Will hums, faux-apologetic, and glances up at her as she approaches. He catches a flash of a long brown braid and the rosy apple of a cheek. "Cavall, my Lady. Go slow, she wants a gentle touch."

"Oh, poor thing," she murmurs, taking in the scars and scabs and matted fur. Cavall's ears tuck back, overwhelmed by the circle of strangers. Will runs a hand down her back, making a soothing noise. "Will you keep her?"

"Not much room in the barracks," he says, then clears his throat. "Peter can't hold her here either, not for long. If she's a runaway there's a chance someone might come back for her. Someone unkind." He lets the suggestion linger, not pressing.

Alana bites her lip and Cavall pushes her nose into her palm, licks at her slender fingers and wags her tail. She hangs her head in defeat, then laughs. "Damnit, Will. Yes, I'll do it. Of course I'll take in your stray."

Will smiles. "Thought you might."

He scratches at the hound's ear again, pats her in a fond farewell and saunters back to Beverly, who whistles low under her breath. "That was some witchcraft, Graham."

He shrugs, straight faced. "She's got a soft spot for strays."

One eyebrow quirks and Beverly leans closer. "Is that all she's got a soft spot for, you think? Just the dog?"

Will watches the lady consult with the stablehand and the rescue by turns, her breath misty in the morning chill, eyes sparkling like jewels. He doesn't offer Bev an answer.

It's enough answer on its own, probably, that Alana drifts over to request him for an escort. Will exhales, remembering months of keeping a careful boundary with her at Port Haven, never alone together in a private room, shy and hesitant in the way of people who are trying to avoid falling into too close an orbit, who want a little more than it was wise to have. She doesn't hesitate now. That means one of two things: either she no longer feels obligated to be coy about pursuing what she wants with Will, or she no longer wants it.

"It's good to see you finding your footing," Alana says softly. Will snorts.

"Did I seem so off-balance?"

She stops, turns to look up at him carefully. "You seem different."

It's a careful, neutral choice of word, but Will can feel the strain of mistrust in it. He glances away over the parapet and nods. "I am. I'm, uh, thinking differently these days."

Alana's eyes follow him and she leans against the balustrade to watch the sun creeping over the ridge of the hills. "Having a child can change the way we think. Makes sense losing one would, too."

Will feels his throat constrict and his lips twist. "I feel responsible," he exhales, more breath than sound, "For what happened to her. I probably always will."

There's a strange, dissonant noise half-caught in Alana's throat. Her voice comes out sounding far away. "Hannibal just said something very similar to me, you know."

Will glances over his shoulder and raises a brow. She's frowning, a thoughtful furrow in the center of her forehead.

"There was an accident," she clarifies, "At the start of the tournament. A man was unseated in the joust and broke his neck when he fell. Tobias. One of the councilors, well liked at court. It was unexpected."

He considers the words she doesn't say, the careful lack of placement of any blame, as if the lance had lifted itself and struck without any outside guidance. "Lord Lecter killed him," Will guesses. He can imagine the seamless performance of shock and remorse he must have presented in the aftermath as easily as he knows, with an immediate certainty, that it was not an accident. Will lays his hands flat on the stone, lets his eyes flutter shut and sees the horned hunter from his nightmares astride a monstrous steed — rising out of pitch-dark water, black with blood, all white and red exposed bone and sinew and branching horns, the two figures joined into a many-limbed chimera. The lifeless form of a drowned knight sprawled beneath its hooves.

Will exhales, the breath shuddering against his ribs. "Must have been hard. Taking a life, *that* changes the way we think, too. Even, uh, accidentally," he adds, with only a ghost of a derisive huff.

The furrow in Alana's brow doesn't smooth out. Her face washes a little gray, though maybe it's only the cold. "Seems strange to compare the two experiences. Having a child and killing a man can't be so easily equated, can they?"

Will hums. "Identically different. Creating life, preserving it, taking it away. And fathers can be killers, too. Sometimes."

A long, tremulous silence follows the pronouncement. Lady Alana blinks into the rising sun and her frown deepens. Some sudden thought strikes her like a dagger of pure ice, cold and clear. Will can see the flinch an instant before she steps back and turns away, uneasy.

"I'll see you around, Will," she murmurs and leaves him alone at the top of the wall, walking briskly for the keep without looking back.

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Will dreams about cutting throats.

Lecter is a hot, dense weight in his arms, strong back pressed firm against his chest, breath taut and shallow, pale throat working against the jagged edge of the knife. Will licks his lips with his face pressed nearly to the nape of his neck. His nose is full of the scent of pine and leather and oil, rich and warm, and they are pressed together from shoulder to thigh. The intimacy is striking and only

heightened by the implicit threat of the blade. He hadn't accounted for that, hadn't planned for it, but Will finds that he likes it. This act *deserves* intimacy.

It feels *good* to dig the knife in, bear deep into meat and sinew and carve them apart, feel the short, sharp gasp of pain he makes. It feels exactly as good as he always hoped it would. Blood pulses out in an eager gush, fast and hot. He watches it fall like rain.

Will steps back and Lecter spills out of his embrace to the ground like a dropped pitcher, gasping and shuddering, throat open in a grim red smile, eyes dark and glossy. Smooth, inscrutable, blank face shifting in a infinitesimal flicker of fear. His first and last display of the sentiment, Will guesses. He observes with his head tilted to the side, darkly fascinated.

His fingers flex around the handle of the knife and then go loose, letting it fall to the ground forgotten. He steps forward and puts his boot on Lecter's neck. Presses down gradually with more and more of his weight, choking out a loud, rough, rasping cry of pain. He'll die anyway, but Will wants to make it *hurt*, to *humiliate*, to grind him down to *dust*—

The next gasp is higher, almost a sob, and the hand that comes up to push feebly at his ankle, struggling to dislodge the boot is… is too small, incongruous, is not Lecter's hand anymore. He doesn't know when the figure at his feet changed, but feels his blood go cold as the delayed recognition trickles in, drips down his spine like ice water.

"Dad—please—”

Blood bubbles up between Abigail's lips with the effort of speaking and the plea comes out more a shape than a sound. Will stumbles back so fast he loses his balance, sprawls artlessly on hands and knees on the bloodsoaked ground, a scream lodged under his chin that he can't get unstuck. His vision tunnels as his heart seizes and jumps into a pounding, panicked frenzy.

"Oh *god*," he chokes out, high and plaintive, hands slipping fruitlessly against her neck, trying to undo the damage, "I didn't — I wasn't — I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Her eyes are wide and accusing and she flinches back from him with blood gushing from her open throat, all the thrashing terror of an animal caught in a snare.

Will keens, numb with horror and terrible shame burning beneath that, roiling in his stomach and rising in his gorge—

He staggers upright in a flash, sheets still tangled around his legs, and vomits into a washing basin. His nightshirt is plastered to his chest with cold sweat and his reflection in the clouded water is clammy and pale. He barely recognizes himself.

He empties out his stomach harsh enough to feel the echoing pangs, spitting bile and gritting his teeth and sucking in a shaking breath and then a second, a third. He scrubs his face dry on a sleeve and peels his shirt off his back, bundling it and throwing it to the floor, sinking down into a shivering crouch.

The air bites cold on his bare shoulders, raises the hair on his neck and prickles over his arms. His throat is raw and his jaw aches from keeping clenched tight. Minutes pass as he sits in a miserable heap in the dark, or longer than minutes, the time stretched out into a thick, strange sludge. Long enough that his legs are stiff when he tries to push back to his feet.

There's no point bundling himself back into his cot tonight, he knows. He won't sleep again and something restless shifts under his skin that has him itching to get away from the close, sweat-sour air of his sleeping quarters. Will shrugs on his last clean tunic with a sigh and steps out into the night, treading softly through the blue-black shadows.

He wanders the castle corridors like a hungry ghost, trailing fingertips over the stones like he's tracing a path through a maze. Glassy eyed and distant, heading nowhere in particular.

The first months at Muskrat Farm he used to wake screaming, tearing stitches with the force of heaving sobs and thrashing terror. Infection and fever boiled his brain in his skull, waking nightmares provided no relief from the dark ichor that drowned all his dreams. Familiarity and necessity have trained a more disciplined response into him. Calmed him down, or given the appearance of it. He's never really slept well, but it used to be at least a little easier to know when he was awake. Once upon a time.

Will stops and stands in front of a hanging tapestry taking up the breadth of the stone wall, stretching out beyond the span of a man's spread arms and as tall as a ten year sapling.

He traces his fingers over the shape of a springing hare, caught mid-leap through an ornamental tangle of thistles. A fox close on its bounding heels and a trio of hunters a few feet behind that, arrows notched and at the ready. Will considers the fox, the incongruous way it seems to play both pursuer and prey as the motif repeats itself endlessly across the border of the arras.

"If someone were to find you lurking down this hallway all alone in the dead of night, Mister Graham," a voice chirps just behind him, "They might wonder if you were up to something."

Will exhales and lets his hand drop to his side, tapping the knife at his belt. "Freddie."

"Are you?"

He musters a thin, tight smile. "Had a little trouble sleeping, so I took a walk. Is that a crime?"

The late hour doesn't seem to matter to Lounds, who's buttoned up to her chin in a jacket trimmed with devoré velvet, red hair plaited into a crown braid. Will wonders if she sleeps at all. Maybe during the day, like a bat.

"Depends on where you walk," she answers with an equally thin smile. "Easy to take a wrong turn in the dark, end up somewhere you don't want to be. Watch your step, Will."

He snorts quietly, half an exhale. "That a threat?"

"It's friendly advice. When I threaten you, you'll know," Freddie promises, stepping closer. "I only want to make sure you understand that I have my eye on you."

Will crosses his arms, a little too hazy from his harsh awakening to check the impulse to growl. "You want friendly advice? It's not very smart to sneak up on a man who kills people for a living."

She raises her brows and whistles low through her teeth.

"I'm afraid I must ask you, Will," another familiar voice echoes from just over his shoulder a little ways down the dark corridor, "To please refrain from menacing my council members, if you would."

Will feels his pallid cheeks flush and shifts his weight to the back foot. "She started it," he murmurs, before he can attempt to check *that* impulse either.

Lord Lecter's eyes are warm with curious amusement, the sleeves of his tunic rolled up to bare the marble of his forearms. He holds a cloth-covered tray in one hand and a dark glass carafe in the other. "If it will keep you out of trouble," he says, with more fondness than chastisement and barely even a flicker of a look to Freddie, "You might consider tarrying in my company a while instead."

Will blinks at the invitation and can't formulate a properly deferential response to keep back the tide of curiosity. "Trying to keep your eye on me, too, my Lord?"

Lecter's smile tilts wider. "Both my eyes. As frequently as they can be put to the task. What do you think? Or am I keeping you from your rest?"

"No rest for the wicked," Will murmurs and steps away from the tapestry with the hunting scene, further into the torchlight where Lecter waits, suspended half in the light and half in the shadow.

Freddie's narrowed eyes play on the back of his neck as he goes, but she turns on her heel with a little huff and leaves them to it. Lecter strolls confidently through the dark, deserted halls of his keep, shoulder to shoulder with Will, until their paces fall into perfect synchronicity.

"I find that I require fewer hours of sleep than most, to feel entirely rested," he explains in his soft, melodic whisper. "In the spare time I occupy myself with anything that comes to hand. Composing, or reading." Lecter unlocks the door to his solar with a deft motion and ushers them both within, where a hot fire crackles loud and bright in the deep arch of the hearth. "Or an excursion to the kitchens. I find the act of cooking to be singularly meditative. It was a pleasure even when it was pure necessity to undertake the task myself, in my wayward youth."

He knows, distantly, that Lord Lecter was not always a Lord even if his family tree is rich with patrician blood on both sides, that Ravenstag is not an ancestral seat but a monument to a prodigal heir and the title he won by persuasion and by force. Even Pazzi knew the rumors. There are campfire tales and ballads that recount the sack and ruin of House Lecter, the triumphant return of the sole living scion. The stories are florid and gruesome in the way that poetry and rumor always tend, but never rang false. Still it rings a little strange to hear Hannibal allude to any part of his own considerable legend himself. To admit to humbler beginnings.

The tray and the carafe are set down on the table with a motion so graceful it half registers to Will like a genuflection. He hums and waits to be directed to a more particular part of the chamber, to be put to some task while the lord eats. Face and throat flushed under the heat of the high-stoked fire and neck prickling with lingering chill.

"Tonight, I have prepared darioles," Lecter says, unfurling his linen cloth and setting out a pair of soft, fragrant custards in small round molds. "And a small selection of honey-glazed fruits. Damson plum and quince, chiefly. I am afraid I did not know your preferences to take them to into account. I hope it will suffice."

A startled bark of a laugh slips between Will's teeth before he gives in and seats himself at the table with a shrug. "Oh, I think it will *suffice*."

Hannibal pours a draught from the glass bottle, the gold of mead instead of the bloodred of claret. The wound on his throat is unbandaged now, healed to a pale red line, more like a fading love-bite from the knife than the proof of a brush with death. Will wants to trace it with his fingers. Wants to sink his teeth in. He sets a damson on his tongue instead, sweet and a burst of tart, and shuts his eyes.

When he opens them again Lecter is holding out the goblet to him, firelight flickering in his shadowed face. Will blinks at him.

"Am I your cupbearer, Lord Lecter?" He leans forward and accepts the offering with a slow, careful shift, wary of the way their fingers risk brushing. "Making double sure of new attempts on your life by preparing your own food and having it tasted, too?"

The mead is strong and dry, with a clean floral taste like a clear stream. Lecter takes the cup back and drinks in turn. It feels ritualistic. Symbolic, certainly, of something he can't fully grasp at understanding.

"Making sure that everything is to your liking," he amends without outright denying Will's assertion.

"Might be considered a waste of effort, pulling out all the stops to impress me," he demurs and digs the side of a silver spoon into one of the darioles, breaking through the flaking crust to the soft middle. "I'm a fisherman's son, you know. I have a fisherman's tastes."

Lecter hums, watching Will with his unflinching intent, dark-eyed curiosity. "Palates can be broadened."

"Not all of them."

"You have a singular malleability to you," Lecter says as he takes a sliver of quince between his teeth. "I am hopeful of our prospects."

Will licks custard from the spoon and tilts his head with a flat smile. "Should I ask what you hope to mold me into?"

Hannibal leans back into the glow of the firelight, eyes half-lidded. "Never ask," he says curtly. "It spoils the surprise."

The food and drink settle with a lush, warm sweetness into Will's belly, and the fire burns itself gradually to a dusky orange. The dark pulls closer around them, like a heavy blanket. Lecter makes another offering of a cushioned chair wrought in dark, old oak. Will settles into it, too comfortable to summon up more than a faint echo of surprise as Lecter takes a seat in front of a dulcimer and sets to playing without preamble or commentary.

To be ushered in as a witness to the dark, calm, intimate air of the solar like his presence is as welcome as Hannibal's own is a new oddity, but one that Will finds he can bear easily enough. He feels like a shadow flickering softly at Lecter's feet. Without boundary or purpose, not even really an outside observer so much as an extension of the decor. Intangible as air. Absolved for a while of the responsibility of being.

He falls into a lull, borne on the gentle hum of the struck strings. He blinks, and for a moment sees Abigail there, all light and air and color, seated in front of the dulcimer with more experienced hands guiding hers over the precise tapping of each tremulous note. Teaching her how to play.

He blinks again and the horned hunter is crouched over him in thick, heavy darkness, brushing the hair back from his face and dripping blood and soot and river water in a cool wash down his cheek to pool in the hollow of his throat. A curious hand falls to the collar of his tunic and draws the laces wider, just far enough to expose the whole of the scarred Verger mark on his sternum. One thumb brushes over the skin where he can feel only the echo of an echo of a touch through deadened nerves.

"Interesting," Lecter murmurs, lower than a whisper, soft as the syrupy thrum of his pulse. "*Very* interesting." He sinks his fingers through skin and muscle and withdraws with Will's beating heart cradled in his fist like a stone. Lifts it to his mouth, a red tongue, sharp teeth–

He blinks again and the sun is rising.

The last ashes in the fireplace have gone cold and the chamber is chill and empty. Will rolls the stiffness from his neck and shoulders with a groan, shaking off a fur that had been settled over his lap sometime in the night.

A low, prickling unease dances in pins and needles over the backs of his arms, runs down his spine like a cold breath of wind.

Fingers reach up to pluck at the laces of his nightshirt and find no sliver of the brand bared. Will traces his fingertips up the column of his throat, brushing over the rasp of his beard, and lets out an uncertain sigh.

He turns on his heel and slips away before Lecter returns, but the viscous eeriness of the dream clings to him like tar.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sure everything is fine Will I wouldn't worry about it honestly

thematic necessity of every AU is that Will MUST run across a Good Doggy at least one time but Winston is so specifically canon-era to me and I could not see my way to calling a dog Applesauce in a medieval setting so Cavall is her own gal! I'm imagining a Bernese, although of course handwavy historicity of modern dog breeds. She's mastiff-y and named after King Arthur's dog, there you go!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

content warnings: canon-typical violence and death, animal death. this is my favorite arc but it is an animal death heavy arc!

this is a nice juicy long one! GOD i love this chapter. and the next chapter. and the one after that. actually now that I am laying it all out I am just really enjoying being the target audience for my own fic. that's what it's all about babey self indulgence... but I DO hope you all enjoy it too

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"A rose and two cups."

"Four magpies."

"Bull*shit* you have four, there's only four in a deck!"

Jimmy crosses his arms stubbornly over his chest, cards folded close. "I know how to count as well as you do," he crows. "It's Bev's deck. Maybe she stacked it."

"It's my deck," Beverly interrupts, "And it's been missing a magpie out of the suit for years."

Brian's smile goes sharper and he throws down his cards with a triumphant gusto. "Okay, show 'em!"

Jimmy groans and pushes his stack of coins across the table toward Brian in lieu of an answer. Beverly snorts into her ale and shakes her head. "You're hopeless, Price."

"Will?"

He shrugs, looks over his cards and sits back on the bench. "Three spades," he bluffs.

Brian stares hard at him, whole face narrowed and drawn in concentration, and then curses. "Fuck, you're hard to read," he sighs. "Sure. Why not?"

Price pouts. "You'll believe a man you met a month ago over me? Your old pal Jimmy?"

"I want to walk out of here with a few coins in my purse for once, can you blame me?" Brian flips down a card and draws two more, blinks too quickly in the way Will takes to mean his hand is better for the switch. "Isn't it enough to be his Lordship's favorite, Graham?" he complains, over the rim of his drink. "Do you have to rob me blind, too?"

"You can't pay up, don't play," Beverly teases as she deals out two of her own cards. "Don't be a sore loser when me and Graham team up and take the shirt off your back one of these nights. I'm not afraid to make you show a little skin again, pretty boy."

He groans. "Don't remind me!" and shuffles his cards. "Shit. Double or nothing."

"Oh, your ass is *mine*, Z—"

"Will Graham."

Everyone at the table starts in tandem. Will sets down his drink to turn and look up into a stony, handsome, distantly familiar face. Short cropped hair and a vacant curve to the thin bow of his mouth. His eyes are flat and cold.

From the set of his shoulders and the slightly discomfited way he glances around the roughshod crowd in the little tavern, he must be one of the knights, although Will doesn't know him. He can just place the memory of his face in the throng he saw at the tournament lists, bowing low to Lecter and kissing his hand.

"Sir Ingram," Beverly says, sparing Will the trouble of casting around fruitlessly for a name to return the greeting.

Jimmy and Brian immediately set to finding interesting patterns in the wood grain. Will checks the impulse to rest his hand at the knife on his belt.

Ingram gives him a long, searching look, and a subtle curl of his lip. "You were a hunter?"

"I still am."

"You don't look like one," he answers in a contemptuous hum, then tilts his chin, looking down his aquiline nose at the card table. "Lord Lecter is taking a hunting party north in the morning. He wants you with us. Be ready at sunrise."

Will stares back at him and nods slowly into his drink. "Alright. Tell him I'll be there."

The curl in his lip sharpens for a flash of an instant to a sneer. "I am not an errand boy."

"Then don't tell him," Will says, unamused. "I'm sure my Lord could guess my answer. I'll come."

"I look forward to it." Ingram stands over the assembled crew another moment, looking down at Will with dark-eyed coldness, his smile like a shard of ice. He turns and leaves as abruptly as he came.

A little air creeps back into the room at his departure, though Jimmy coughs to clear his throat. "Speaking of his Lordship's favorites. What'd you do to piss that guy off?"

Will frowns into his ale. "Just have one of those faces."

"Lucky you," Beverly hums and bumps her shoulder into his. Brian casts a wary eye at him over his hand of cards. Jimmy tips back a long quaff of ale. "Hey, stay out of trouble, yeah? No making enemies, like you promised me before."

"I already said I would, didn't I?"

She ducks her head a little closer and Brian grimaces at the look on her face. "Bev, come on—"

"I'm warning him," she argues in a low hiss, catching Will's sleeve. "People who go on these hunting trips, Will, they don't always come back. You get that?" He turns to look her in the face and finds it drawn and serious, eyes dark and flashing. "There was a girl a few summers back who joined the guard the same time as we did. Lord Lecter and his knights took her along on a hunt and then they came back without her. Like she was never here. Something *happened* to her out there and nobody who knows has ever said a word."

Will stares thoughtfully down at his cards and the brand over his heart stings and itches under the rough linen of his shirt. Lord Lecter's given him no indication of discovering his duplicity. On the contrary, they've shared a few more late night meals in the quiet dark since the first, though Will has taken better care to stay on his guard and leave before sleep has the chance to take him unaware. His jaw pulses. "Who was she?"

The three guards are silent, looking over their drinks and their cards and their coins with matching uncertain glances.

Then, "Miriam," Brian answers, quietly. "Her name was Miriam."

Will nods and sets his cards down, pushing his winnings back to the pool at the center of the table.

"Better turn in. Sounds like I have an early morning," he says with a crooked, sidelong grin. The others make quiet noises of protest, but he pushes back his stool anyway and waves a hand. "My, uh, hand was useless anyway. Quit while I'm ahead, right?"

Beverly calls after him but doesn't leave the table to give chase. Will lets the noise and fury of the place swallow him up.

He doesn't quite make it out the door and into the alleyway before a hand settles on his shoulder, jolting him out of his stride. "Evening, stranger."

Will moves without conscious intent, all reflex, and ducks the grasp to slam the other figure into the wall, shoves the point of his dagger against their gut, eyes flashing, breathing hard. Jack Crawford looks back at him with an unimpressed tilt to his brows.

"Guess I should have expected that," he admits. "Is it just me, or are you getting jumpier?" Will lowers his knife, jaw flexing around a swallowed grimace.

"What are you doing here, Jack?"

"What do you think?" He rolls his shoulder out a little tenderly.

Will frowns. "Mason sent you to check up on me? Thought courier work was a little below your pay grade. *Captain*."

"I can make an exception," Jack says around a thin white grin. "When it matters. High time you and I took some initiative and worked together. Like old times."

Will sheaths his knife and runs a hand through his hair, stalking away a pace under the sagging eaves. "Old times," he scoffs. "Tracking down poachers in the name of the crown, protecting vert and venison. *That* is not *this*," he says in a low hiss. "*This* is treason and torture and murder. You're a law man, Jack, don't stoop to my level."

Jack's wide arms fold over his broad chest like a couple of oak trunks, and he lifts his chin up, stubborn and proud. "Your level is my level, Will. I lost a home too. I wanna see justice for that. I lost a lot of people I cared about when Wolf Trap burned. Came damn close to losing you, too."

The debt thrown back in his face hits Will like a kick in the gut and he bites down hard on his tongue, turning away to watch snowmelt spill down the gutter. "You know what I think?" he says. "I think you *did* lose me. I think I'm something hollow and moldering walking around pretending to be alive because I'm just too useful to let me rot. Whatever I've been doing for the past three years, it doesn't feel much like living."

“That what you wanna do?” Jack unfolds his arms, steps closer and boxes Will in between the rigid set of his shoulders. Concern draws his face into a stern, grave mask. “You wanna lay down and die?”

Will glares back at him.

“I don’t think you do,” he continues after a terse beat. “I think you and I both know there’s better ways to spite Lord Verger than suicide. I don’t like the slimy piece of shit any more than you do, but you know he’s a powerful patron to have in our corner. I heard about your plan. I think it’s good, Will, and I think you’re the man to pull it off. You find us that way in,” he urges, with a soft press of his palm to Will’s chest. “You name the time and the place for the coup, and I’ll get you the Vulture of Ravenstag in chains. Hannibal Lecter’s downfall is something to *live* for, Will. You hook him and I’ll land him.”

Will shuts his eyes, takes a deep breath and lets it out on a raspy sigh. Jack’s mouth curls around another grin, a little wider, a little more cocksure when he nods.

“You look good, Graham,” he says. “This is gonna be good for you. You’ll see.”

“Can’t promise he won’t figure me out and serve me up on a spit, Jack,” Will brushes him off, but the man’s brash confidence is contagious anyway, it scorches under his tongue like a hot coal. “I’ll do my best.”

“That’s all I’m asking,” Jack Crawford says, patting him heartily on the back. “All I could ever ask.”

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The morning is cold and bright. Good weather for a hunt. The assembled knights are a wash of flushed faces and steaming breaths, stiff fingers clumsy on the reins as the party carves a line through the drifting snow, making slow progress across the sprawling hills of the chase. They ride over the long, wide valley and then up into foothills and the forest beyond, with the rising sun almost at their backs and the wind in their faces.

Will keeps to the rear of the party, at a safe distance from the noblemen who glance at him with mixed suspicion and scorn, or who prefer to overlook him entirely. At a safe distance from the one particular nobleman who looks at him with nothing of the kind, only veiled intrigue, quiet fascination, appetence unwavering.

Curled in small and half-asleep against his chest, riding double, Abigail watches the quiet procession with her lip curled. “My father never cared much for the heraldic way of hunting.”

“It’s a little vulgar,” Will agrees in a low breath. “Making sport out of a ritual of subsistence.”

“Wasteful,” she says, running a small white hand over the mare’s mane. “We used every part of anything we caught. He *insisted*. Smoked and salted the meat, tanned the hide, made string from tendon and gut, chiseled the antlers into useful things. Said it was murder to do anything less.”

Will looks to the drooping boughs of evergreen trees and hums, his hand tracing over the bone handle of the knife at his belt, the one her father carved, the one that cut her throat. “Murder is just wastefulness?”

Abigail’s face is shadowed under her dark hair and her tone is light, difficult to parse. “More of murder is semantics than you might think. Hunting, too.” She turns back to him, soft smile, dark seeping bloodstain staining the cowl of her cloak. “You know how noblemen hunt? *Par force*, it’s

called. Playing with their food. They run game down for hours along the relays until it's too tired to run any farther and then when the thing's on its last legs and turns to defend itself, they bring it down. Praise their prey for its tenacity and spirit and kill it anyway."

Across the copse, just out of sight, a stallion gives a loud chuff and Lord Lecter's lilting voice carries on the wind, indistinct but keen. Will doesn't strain himself to listen to the words, which aren't intended for his ears. "And your father, where did he draw the line? Between murder and mercy?"

Her smile widens, teeth tinged with red. "Do it right, and the stalk is more merciful than the chase. You advance on the quarry on foot, slow, so it doesn't startle. Corner it, back it gradually into range of an archer. It dies before it ever sees the danger."

He turns this over in his mind, slowing to a trot. "That would require two good hunters."

"We never got a chance to hunt together," Abigail muses with a distant kind of thoughtful sadness. "Maybe we should have, Will."

Will shakes his head, ducks a heavy bough and follows the party in a winding slope that climbs the next hill in a waver. "I wanted to give you a new start. To be different from your father."

"So did I," she lilts, with another thin, bloodsoaked smile.

He blinks through blurring vision and the light and air and color that make her up slide out of focus and vanish. Will looks away with a sigh and in the same moment catches a flash of silver between the trees that pulls him up short.

He leans forward on his mount, lips pressed in a thin line, jaw tight, and stares into the dense tangle of forest brush, searching the ridge above and the long incline below. He tightens his stance and pulls into a canter to catch up the other hunters, who observe his approach with wary glances.

"My Lord."

The riders at the head of the party fall silent and the line of Lecter's shoulders shifts to attention. He casts a flat, curious look back to Will, expectant.

"We have company," Will says, tersely. "Wolves. Maybe half a dozen. Flanking us."

The announcement that should by rights be met with clear concern and unease is greeted with a mixed silence. One of the knights behind Will laughs, sharp and sudden, as though he's missed something obvious. Hannibal's flashing eyes meet his and he breaks into a broad grin, wider than Will has seen from him in a month of service.

"So they are," he says, cheerfully. "Just so. Well spotted, Will. You have a very keen eye."

A shiver trails up Will's spine. He swallows thickly. "What?"

But Lecter has already turned back again, dark eyes dancing along the wooded ridge. "Master Tier!" he calls out to a hollow between the snow-dappled firs. "Come and join us! I hope you have kept in good appetite."

A long, low howl sounds from the depths of the trees, and then a second in eerie harmony. Will's eyes go wide as one of the wolves spills out into the clearing, weaving between the startled horses, huge and gray, bounding like an alaunt.

Lord Lecter doesn't keep a kennel, he remembers all in a chilling flash.

A figure appears on the crest of the ridge, hunched like another wolf, and then slowly unfurls into the silhouette of a man, beardless and barely out of boyhood, wearing a huge shag of animal hide like a cloak. A jagged composite of wolf and black bear, particolored with careful stitching. The glassy-eyed head of the wolf rests atop his own like a hood, white teeth curving out from the jaw to frame his face. Like the form of the chimera is swallowing the young man up.

The knight who cornered Will in the tavern pulls the limp carcass of a rabbit from his saddlebag and throws it to the circling pack, the motions familiar and ritualistic. Rote. The wolves snap and snarl and make quick work of the offering, silver muzzles painted in red.

The boy-wolf-bear lopes down the hillside to meet them, his gloved hands brushing over the backs of the wolves as they eat. He meanders among the agitated horses, glancing up at each rider in turn, something flat and calculating and cold in his youthful face. He stops when he reaches Will, tilts his head to the side in a blatantly canine gesture of curiosity, and turns back to Hannibal.

"My hunters came hungry, my Lord. Did yours?" he asks. His voice is soft, but there's an undercurrent of growl to it. "Are their teeth bared?"

The keen pleasure on Lecter's face has not dimmed at all. Will recognizes a little pride in his mien. "I have always so admired your fascination with teeth."

"Come on, huntsman!" another of the knights shouts, impatiently, "Find us a hart, will you? Lets not laze around all day half-frozen when there's game to be had."

Will frowns, but does not look to the speaker. He keeps his eyes on Hannibal's face, watches the flash of irritation darken the expression there before his smile fixes back into place. Tier's lip curls, and his flat, glassy eyes flicker in annoyance.

"Aye, Sir," he acquiesces, and cocks his chin, letting out a sharp bark that lifts every wolf's head from their half-finished meal. One or two of the fastest turn to veer off again into the undergrowth. "There's a lay to the west at the mouth of the valley. Half hour's ride."

Lord Lecter nods, watching the wolves sprint ahead. "Lead on, Master Tier," he prompts. "We will follow. I believe Sir Sutcliff has volunteered himself to take point."

The man in the shroud of pelts bows and lets out a wild howl to match every one of the beasts in his entourage, whipping up the pack to an excited frenzy. He darts away as fast as they had, barely visible between the heavy-laden branches in the distance. They follow.

Picking through the brush and along the slope in a rising mist, the assembly falls to silence until the path stops rising ahead of them and begins to curve into a gentle fall. Will's eyes search the undergrowth for tracks and traces, shed velvet and the occasional sparse tuft of hair caught in the crevices of the bark.

He thinks of Lecter's strange wildling huntsman with a prickling unease in his chest, apprehension caught thick in his throat. More beast than man, at home among the ravening animals, ragged bits of rent flesh and spilled blood trailing him like comets. Lecter's bright-eyed esteem marks him not a friend but a favored plaything. He must have been looking at Will the same way all along and it only took an outside perspective to notice. To stop confusing idle curiosity for earnest regard.

A wolf who comes when he is called, Will thinks bitterly, is only another kind of dog.

Still a luckier class of dog, maybe. A little envy creeps in at the thought that Lecter seems much less inclined to spurn or starve or kick his pets than another lord Will could name. He wonders what games Hannibal plays with them to amuse himself, nevertheless. It seems likely he'll have a chance to discover the answer soon enough.

"There!" Someone shouts. A branch cracks in the distance as a pair of hooves stagger and startle into a run. The stag rears up, tossing a wild-eyed head weighed down with a heavy set of antlers, and disappears into the trees.

"It's a Royal!" another knight bellows, and the wolves start up a cacophony of howling and yipping, tearing off in the relays to run the quarry down. Will holds his breath and tilts straight after Lord Lecter as the whole hunting party breaks into a frantic gallop.

Branches whip past his face and cold wind whistles in his ears and stings his cheeks, but Will keeps Lecter's back square in his sights, not trusting to any other goal. The deer in the chase is somewhere out of sight ahead, bounding and weaving frantically over fallen trees, leaping a crumbling stone wall and turning this way and that in a frenzied attempt to lose the pursuit. Will remembers running like that. He remembers the way his pounding feet led him straight into Lecter and the keen edge of his waiting sword.

Around the edge of the tapestry they weave and come back around to the same place they started, hunter and hunted in an endless repeating motif. The knotted scar across Will's belly pulses and aches with the shuddering force of hoofbeats, the wolves snap and howl, and at last a cheer goes up from one of the knights far ahead. Another shouts triumphantly that the quarry is at bay, but then the one who cheered lets out a short, gurgling scream and goes quiet.

Will pulls up hard on the reins, stops behind Lord Lecter to take in the scene, the gore painted over the snow, dripping from the hart's proud crown of antlers as its eyes roll wildly and it heaves for breath. The red-bearded knight who clamored so impatiently for the hunt to begin is sprawled on the ground beside the injured quarry, gored through the eye, shuddering out the last throes of a rash, ignominious death.

The stag's last act of defiance does not earn it a reprieve. Lecter nods to the grim knight with the false, empty smile, and Sir Ingram dismounts and stalks over to the wounded hart, sword drawn. He grips it by one scarlet-painted point, hoists its head up to cut its throat.

Will lets out a quiet, unsteady breath through his gritted teeth, but he does not turn his face away.

Whoever was pursuing whom a moment before, it's clear at the end of the race there are no victors to be had. Hunter and hunted have met the same end.

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With a cold jolt like the surface of a frozen lake giving way beneath his feet, Will comes awake all at once. He exhales, an uneasy shiver stumbling down his spine. The air is still and silent and the forms of the other figures in the tent are all motionless, dead asleep. The exception is what woke him. Lord Lecter's face looms close in the crepuscule dark.

Will blinks up at him, dazed and bleary-eyed, trying to be sure what he's seeing, whether he's waking or dreaming. If he squints he can almost see the cloying layer of soot and blood overlaying his features, the crown of antlers sprouting from his head. The inscrutable marble of his face defies clear study, but his eyes are bright, gleaming as if lit from within.

“Are you with me, Will?”

He shifts upright, letting the blankets pool around his waist, blinking slowly, breathing even slower. “Are you real?”

A faint smile creases his thin mouth and his voice is low and warm close to the shell of Will’s ear. “As real as you are. Come, on your feet.”

Will scrubs a palm across his face and makes to follow, tugging on his cloak and stumbling gracelessly upright. One of the other knights stirs a little, only to snort and bundle tighter into their bedroll.

It’s a mystifying reversal of the order of the day to feel Hannibal’s attention focused his way again. Dawn to dusk, Will stood silently in lengthening shadows and watched his Lord laud every knight in turn, congratulate Ingram for his kill, praise Tier the huntsman’s tracking, bend heads and talk cheerfully with every man who rode at his side save for Will himself. Barely turning a passing word or a glance his way, as if at last the time had come to acknowledge the implacable disparity of their stations. Leaving Will alone to whet his knife and wonder petulantly how there could have been any point in bringing him along on the hunt just to ignore him.

Well. Here, it seems, is the point.

Will feels a thrill in his belly that should be the cold prickle of unease, but true misgivings never come as he tucks against Hannibal’s side and allows himself to be led away from the darkened campsite, past the edge of the trees where the the landscape sinks away into lower ground. The stars burn down overhead with a kind of desperate, searing light, like they’re straining to get closer.

The edge of the rise swells up to meet them and Hannibal stops at the very crest of the hill, overlooking the vale and the demesne beyond, the endless black and white plain of forest stretching back toward Ravenstag. In the twinkling of the winter night the jut of the high towers are nearly visible in the far distance.

“Tell me,” Hannibal says without preamble, his eyes fixed on that horizon. “About the first life you ever took.”

Will looks to him and tilts his head, quietly askance, but he only waits with expectation bared.

Outright lies don’t sit as comfortably on Will’s tongue as omissions or evasions, so he clears his throat and says, roughly, “He was a poacher. Or I thought he was.”

Abigail steps into place beside the pair of them as if summoned, her long hair loose in the wind, her expression distant with old grief.

“For small offenses, an animal or two out of season or in the wrong part of the wood, we made a habit of knocking on doors to give a warning, quietly ask on Lord Bloom’s behalf if the family in question needed any assistance. But when I knocked on his door–” Will stumbles over the recollection, waits a moment to take a bracing breath of cold air. “It wasn’t poaching, what he was doing. He was taking girls from the village, from outlying farms, girls the same age as his daughter. Killing them because he felt compelled to do the same to her, to keep her close, to honor his love for her. He heard a verderer at the door and panicked, pulled her away and tried to strangle her before the law could have them separated and lose him the chance, and I, uh,” Will licks his lips, “I stopped him.”

Hannibal turns at last away from the horizon, searching his face with an intense curiosity. “Did you do it with your hands?”

He shakes his head, feebly. “With a crossbow. He took three bolts before he went down. He was very… determined.”

With a quiet hum, Hannibal’s face bends back toward the sky. “A father’s love, resolute unto the bitter end. Ever-fixed, all-consuming.”

“Consuming,” Abigail echoes, soft, with a quick flicker of a smile. “Couldn’t have said it better myself.”

Will can’t stop his head from swiveling in her direction, swept up in the reverie, in a shared knowing look. Something in Hannibal’s words strikes a familiar chord. Wistful. “Have you ever been a father?”

There is a heartbeat of stillness and a question distinctly more discordant in timbre. “Did it feel good to kill that man? Did you enjoy it?”

“I did it because I had to, my Lord.”

“Will,” Lord Lecter says, gently scolding.

“I liked it,” he admits in a caustic snarl, unable to hold Abigail’s gaze, face growing hot despite the chill of the wind. “Yes. I felt righteous.”

There is a new warmth in Hannibal’s voice when he responds, excessively pleased, almost preening. “We are most ourselves when we allow our natural inclinations to guide us,” he intones, “Act on essential urges and instincts. Nourish the soul with the meat that will best feed it.”

Will shivers under his cloak. “Kill anything it would feel good to kill?”

“Hunting is problem solving, dear Will,” he croons genially, turning to face him with the starlight gleaming in his eyes. “What objective does your skill and spirit bend you towards, in this moment?”

Until his fingertips brush against the smooth bone of the handle Will doesn’t consciously notice the path of his hand arcing closer to the knife at his belt. In the split-second of contact, he feels his whole arm flex with the urge to draw it, shove the blade between Hannibal’s ribs and angle up toward his heart. To watch his wine-dark eyes widen in startled admiration and then watch him die.

He checks the temptation and forces his hand to keep its distance. Shifts close enough to feel the ambient heat of Hannibal’s body next to his, instead, so near that the borders that maintain their respective shapes threaten to overlap. “What did you really bring me out here for, Lord Lecter?”

One gloved hand reaches up to rest against the side of Will’s face, cupping his jaw, thumb stroking along the ridge of his cheek. The familiar urge to flinch away doesn’t arise as expected, and in fact the impulse that falls to Will now is to lean in closer, eyes dropping half-shut at the intense, radiating warmth of the single point of contact. “A demonstration, I hope,” he says in a low rumble that Will feels trembling on his own tongue. “I’m quite curious to see what you’ll do.”

Another unconscious impulse seizes Will, now. He shifts his weight forward to surge up the last few inches and presses his lips to the corner of Lecter’s mouth, either a favor or a promise bestowed against the soft skin there. He feels the curve of a subtle smile against his lips and sees the gleam in Lecter’s eyes sharpen as he draws back.

“I have huge faith in you,” he says, ardently, and before Will can shift his weight quite back to steady ground, Hannibal shoves him over the edge of the rise.

Will lurches and tumbles in an ungainly rolling sprawl down the long slope of the hill, every impact sending up a cascading avalanche of snow and loose brush. He feels his head strike solid earth at least once in the descent, snowmelt in his eyes and blood in his mouth from biting down on his tongue. He doesn’t catch himself so much as run out of hill to keep falling down, breathless and cold and bruised in so many places he can’t catalog them all at once.

Will spits out snow and muffled curses, blinks up at the empty hilltop above him, and finally feels the sensation of buzzing excitement giving way to foreboding. It’s a dark, empty tunnel of forest yawning out before him, black with shadows and studded with a sharp-edged excrescence of pine like a wide and toothy mouth.

The foreboding lasts exactly a half-second longer before turning to heavy, sickening dread, because the moment Will stumbles to his feet and looks out into the trees, he hears the wolves begin to howl.

Chapter End Notes

rip Sir Sutcliffe we hardly knew ye. and in fact I did not bother even to specifically namedrop ye before I had ye gruesomely killed! anyway move over loser we're cheering and clapping wildly for Randall Tier now. look at him go! maybe possibly straight up raised by wolves, living his feral girl furry FANTASY out in the woods...who among us is half as fulfilled and self-actualized? certainly not Will

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> WELL I am a day early again but. Once again I just want to pull the update trigger a little early and also my partner is out of town. She's not actually 80% of my impulse control I demonstrably never have any of that even when she is around but if I can't be cuddlin' then I might just be postin'!! That's how the math works out.
>
> content warnings: you might have guessed that there would be graphic violence, death, and animal injury/death from the premise of this section. But I did wake up in a cold sweat one night in early march after realizing that I had to make blorbo from my shows wrestle a wolf to the death and so that is the content I am providing babey!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will runs.

His boots sink into the sucking, drifting snow, thick underfoot, slowing his panicked sprint to an agonizing crawl. The howls behind him are distant but growing closer every moment, drifting on the wind down the long tunnel of the valley.

The trail of footfalls trailing behind him is half obscured, mercifully, by the drifting gusts. It won't save him, but it might buy a little time.

He shields his eyes from the blustering wind and watches a shadow swim across his blurring, unsteady vision some distance ahead. Another figure making the desperate flight across the dale, wisps of straw-colored hair trailing behind her. Intangible and distant as a dream, leaving no trace of a step on the ground where she goes.

It makes a kind of sense. It would have been high summer when she made the same journey. Will grits his teeth and follows close behind.

The baying of the wolves is loud as a horn and Miriam the guard casts a terrified glance back over her shoulder when it crescendoes. She looks straight at Will and then through him, unseeing. Her face is chalky with exhaustion and terror, a smear of mud painted across her cheek. She's young, but Tier is still younger, more boy than man, his soft face alight with juvenile exultation and his bared teeth stained red as he lunges after her.

The shadows swirl as Miriam and the huntsman twist and grapple, striking into branches and kicking up undergrowth. They somersault to the ground in a wild tangle of limbs and the young guard with her advantage of size and strength comes out on top, pinning Tier and fumbling for the shortsword buckled at her side, breathing hard. She draws the weapon and raises her arm to thrust it down into his chest.

In another moment it would be a secure victory, but Tier throws his head back and howls, jubilant. Will sees Miriam look up directly into the jaws of a springing wolf. He flinches away before they snap shut.

The shadows burst apart and leave the soft blue shimmer of rising dawn on snow. The world is bathed in bleak monochrome, cold light and the dark cage of the pine forest, growing thicker now at the far end of the valley. Will is alone again. No chance of reaching the safety of the citadel before his pursuit catches him up. Long odds of survival once they have him winded and cornered and outnumbered. Tenacity is not a tool sharp-edged enough to win him this fight, not on its own. Not on the terms that have been set for him. He will not be prey.

Will watches his breath steam in the air and throws himself headlong at the dark column of an old fir, whorled bark scraping his palms. He shakes loose a rattling hail of needles as he climbs, tugging himself up the rising ladder of branches, high enough to look back and catch a glimpse of the pack tearing after his faded tracks.

He braces his back against the trunk and leaps, jumping blindly over the gap to the next tree over. Something groans and cracks when he catches a handhold and heaves himself up into the foliage again, but the branch holds. Will climbs a little higher and tests his luck with another leap, wrenches his shoulder when he lands this time, but lands distant enough now from where his tracks end on the ground below to consider himself halfway hidden.

Breathless, dizzy with exertion and numb with the frigid cold, Will draws his hunting knife and waits.

The wolves catch up before Tier does, circling and scenting the air, white teeth flashing. Brushstrokes of silver pelage move too quickly to distinguish where one beast ends and the next begins. They whine and scrabble at the base of the first tree in confusion.

The huntsman in his borrowed hide gives another sharp, high bark, chastising, and the wolves flock to him in answer, panting and shaking out their heavy coats. Will can't see more of Tier than the patchwork furs he's cloaked himself in as he paces into the pine thicket, but he can spot the restless, savage energy of his stride even from this distance. Eager to resume the chase. Eager for the chance to tear into something, to rend, to bite.

Will finds himself sympathetic to the impulse, mirroring it. His fingers are nerveless and stinging with cold, but his stomach clenches in tense pangs of hunger. Anticipation.

Tier's gaze traces slowly skyward into the foliage of the tree where Will's trail vanished, tipping up until his pale face catches the glow of dawn. Will holds his breath until the whites of his eyes come into view.

He shifts his foot deliberately down onto a dead bough, barren and scarred with the jagged splinters of a lightning strike, and snaps it off the tree in a jagged spar with a crack that echoes like thunder. The heavy weight plunges through the branches and crashes at the base of the tree like a bolt from a springald. The circling wolves yelp and scatter and Will drops down in its wake to land in a crouch, teeth bared.

Lord Lecter's huntsman staggers back a half-step, but his eyes go wide with something much more like delight than alarm and it only takes half a breath to catch his balance and lunge for Will's throat.

Tier moves quick, knocks him flat against the tree, and Will's head snaps back with a dull thud that makes his ears ring. He can't press his advantage any further with Will slashing out madly with his knife, so they draw back and circle one another in the snow, stumbling, wild-eyed, before springing forward again.

Another swipe with the knife, much more deliberate this time, a low plunge toward Tier's soft underbelly. His quick hands catch at Will's wrist and divert the path of the knife to a shallow scrape

along his side. Will snarls and Tier's lip curls in perfect symmetry as he digs his nails in and bends Will's thumb back. The handle slips out of his grasp and a lancing spasm shoots up his forearm. The knife tumbles to the ground, lost in the snow.

Will hisses through his teeth and knocks his skull into the huntsman's face, brute crack of bone on bone. The impact jars Tier out of his snarl and Will can feel the shift of something snapping in the bridge of Tier's nose, droplets of blood scattering over the frost, but it leaves Will bruised too, vision swimming, breath steaming thick in the frozen air.

Fingernails dig ragged into his cheek and leave a stinging scrape as the combat devolves into an insensible, brutish grapple, fighting dogs tearing into one another's hides. Tier and Will thrash and scuffle and strike with teeth and claws, then topple to the forest floor and scrap like wild beasts. Snowmelt spills cold down the back of Will's neck and kicks up into his eyes and mouth as they roll, and with the momentum he grabs a fistfull of Tier's hair and yanks, pushes his face into the snow and bares his teeth.

Tier bucks and kicks wildly in a struggle to dislodge him, then turns his smothered face to the side just enough to let out a breathless grunt of a howl. Will realizes the prognostication of the sound just in time to brace for impact.

The wolf doesn't manage to open his throat with the jaws that snap shut a hairsbreadth from his face, but the weight of its lunge still knocks him off the huntsman and onto his back, slamming him into the ground with bruising force. It's one of the bigger of the pack, grizzled and golden-eyed, with a pelt as dark as iron. Will reaches up and fumbles for purchase against the sharp white points of teeth before his injured hand falters and gives way. The wolf growls and snaps again, teeth sinking into the muscle of his shoulder and locking there.

White-hot pain lances through Will like a wildfire and his jaw spasms around a choked scream. It feels deep, impossibly deep, like the points should be scraping against bone. He shuts his eyes and sucks in a handful of shaking breaths, thin with an involuntary whine. The teeth dislodge an instant later, the wolf rearing up for another bite.

Will pitches himself to the side with a desperate reel, rolling from supine to prone, and his shoulder *screams* at the jerky motion. His free arm swings out to brace against the ground as his spine bows with the pain and–

–His fingertips brush cold steel.

Will's eyes snap open in a flash and he twists himself into a low crouch, turning and meeting the pouncing wolf with Abigail's dagger clutched white-knuckle tight in his hand. The pounce knocks him flat on his back again, but he feels the flesh parting under the blade with the impact. Blood spills over his face, warm as Lughnasadh rain, painting him as thick with gore as the horned hunter of his nightmares.

The dying wolf yowls as Will shoves it off his chest and staggers to his feet, growls long and low at the others still circling, hackles raised. Tier circles too, limping slightly, furs askew, blood dripping sluggishly from his nose and over his small white teeth. There's a new fury burning in his cold eyes as he looks between Will and the fallen member of his pack. "You're going to regret that," he growls.

Will wipes the blood from his eyes with the back of his hand. "I don't think I will, actually."

Rancor twists his pale, boyish face, and the huntsman launches himself at Will with renewed fervor, grabbing a handful of his cloak and aiming a vindictive fist at the throbbing wound in his shoulder.

Will twists away from the worst of the blow, though the pain still knocks the breath out of him.

He huffs and staggers, reels back to punch Tier sharply in the solar plexus, returning the favor. Will flips his grip on the hunting knife, lashing out with the blunt butt of the handle, relishing the solid smack of bone on flesh. He closes in, lays on another three or four strikes in merciless succession, near lightheaded with the burn of adrenaline and new resolve.

Awareness bleeds in only gradually that he's forced Tier to the ground, more crimson speckling the snow as his fist makes jarring contact over and over again, drawing out bubbling gasps, cracking bone. The circling wolves don't intercede again, keeping a cowed distance, abandoning their wildling keeper to Will's ire. Will feels his whole body shaking like a mountainside in an avalanche as he wraps his fingers around the other man's neck and squeezes.

Tier's eyes go wide and then go flat as coins, body bucking and seizing in a last frantic struggle for air. Will couldn't assign a moment to the decision to kill him, to do it with his hands, but once the choice is made it feels inevitable. Instinctive.

Life drains out of Tier under the relentless clutch of Will's hands. He watches until the very last, breathing heavy, nearly euphoric with the rush of righteous power. Taking a life had felt so *good* that first time. Back before he was a weapon, a tool, a pet, and the work was work. He had tried so hard to forget that feeling, to drown it at the muddy bottom of his memory, but now it bubbles up to the surface again, bright as a hobby lantern flickering over a dead marsh. It feels like a gift.

The courteous thing to do, Will thinks giddily, would be to offer Lord Hannibal some gesture of gratitude in kind.

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Zeller is the first to greet him as he stands guard at the gate to the upper bailey, though his eyes are wide and wary at first. Recognition must take a moment to set in through the mask of blood and the clammy, ashen face beneath that. When it does he nearly drops his sword. "Fucking hell, Graham," he spits, and "We thought you were *dead*."

Will gives him a slanting, sideways smile. "Better luck next time."

"Are you–?" his eyes flicker to the dark stain above the place where Will is stabilizing his shoulder with the opposite hand and he curses again. "Okay," he huffs, as his voice cracks into a treble. "Okay. Bev. *Bev*!"

The door behind him kicks open and her dark-haired head pokes through. Will watches her almond eyes go even wider than Brian's. "Oh my god."

Will doesn't quite manage a wave, but the pair of them rush out to brace him on either side and help him stagger over the threshold, not quite as steady as he had been at the beginning of the long trek back through the belly of the dale. Beverly sits him carefully on a bench near the gatehouse and sets to cataloging his assorted gouges, scrapes and bruises with a deep furrow digging into her brow.

"His Lordship and the hunting party returned hours ago," Zeller narrates worriedly beside him. "They didn't say where you'd gone. We were so sure–"

"Got separated," Will says brusquely. "My fault. Pretty damn stupid, actually. Tripped over something in the dark and ended up at the bottom of a hill, couldn't find a way back up. Ran into some of the local wildlife."

Beverly narrows her eyes at a deep scratch across his temple. “They really did a number on you, huh? Thought you’d have the whole forest eating out of your hand in five minutes, Mister Woodsman.”

With a self-deprecating huff of laughter, Will shakes his head. “I always got along better with the domesticated ones, anyway.”

As if in answer, a sharp bark sounds across the courtyard and Cavall bounds over with her crooked tail wagging, nose pressed to his knee. Lady Alana follows close behind, flushed with cold and bewilderment and worry. The Lord Paramount trails her, taking in the scene in a roving glance. His expression is, by contrast, entirely abstruse.

Will is distantly aware of Alana and the guardsmen exchanging words, some doubtless directed his way, but when he catches the first flash of Hannibal’s eyes and the warm, honey-rich light that flickers in the shadows of them, he finds his focus drawn too narrow to heed anything else. It looks like pride. It might only be his vision tunneling, swimming a little as exhaustion begins to catch him up in earnest. But he has a keen eye for these things.

He swallows thickly and feels the words slur in his mouth when he hails, “Lord Lecter.”

More conversation slides over him, passes like a gust of wind, breaks like a shallow wave. Will pays no mind to the murmurings of *so much blood* and *not all his own* and *run and get the physician*. He watches Hannibal smile with a subtle narrowing around the eyes, soft and secretive, only for him.

“No need, Miss Katz, Mister Zeller,” he reassures with a confident tilt of his head. “I want to see to Mister Graham myself.” He turns away to relay a few quiet orders in a calm, even tone, breaks the spell and leaves Will stranded a moment longer, staring hazily up at him, before he turns back again and says softly, “Are you with me, Will?”

Will can’t find the breath to answer in any way but to shut his eyes and lean in to the arm that wraps around his waist, bracing him, helping him to his feet and guiding his staggering paces. He doesn’t particularly have it in him even to make a note of the destination until he reaches it, the familiar slow chuff of the heavy wood door to Lord Lecter’s solar falling shut behind him, the firelight flickering high in the grate.

Lecter eases him down to a divan, leaning close over him, brushing the sweat-stained curls off his forehead, examining the bloodstained wool crusted to his bitten shoulder. Will grits his teeth and sucks in a few careful, whistling breaths with an edge of quiet agony.

Eventually he musters up the strength to say, ragged, “You tried to have me killed.”

A glint of silver catches the light, and Will recoils to see his hunting knife held delicately in Hannibal’s hand, his thumb tracing the edge. He lifts it to the sleeve of the tunic and begins to cut away, a placid smile curling at the corner of his mouth. “I knew it was one potential outcome. A regrettable one, but entirely possible.”

The clotted mass of the ugly wound sets to sluggish bleeding as he pries the fabric loose and a bitten-off scream chokes out of Will. He presses his face into the closest surface at hand and sucks in a breath that carries the smell of pine and leather. Hannibal’s free hand catches the hair at the nape of his neck, combs through it with a casual caress. Will decides to belabor the point until he gets a straight answer. “You set your *wild dog* on me,” he accuses.

“And you emerged vital and victorious.” Hannibal’s hand clutches tighter at the nape of his neck and then lets go. “Look at you. Magnificent, savage thing.”

Will makes an involuntary kind of growl and doesn't pull away. He recognizes dimly that his head is resting on Lecter's chest, nearly over his heart. He can feel the quiet thunder of his pulse, muffled under cloth and skin and sinew, a distant hypnotic rhythm. "I killed him with my hands," he confesses in a throaty murmur.

"Wonderful," he says warmly, and pulls until the knife rends the rest of his tunic in half, the fabric sloughing uselessly from his shoulders, air prickling on bare skin. Will flinches back and his heart jumps into his throat, immobile as a stone, choking off his next shallow breath. House Verger's brand is cold as ice against his sternum, the skin of the indelible mark raised and raw and unmistakable. Hannibal doesn't spare it even a passing glance, setting the knife down on an ornate table, smiling wider. "There now. Indulge me a little further if you would. I've already had a bath drawn and I would not prefer to waste it."

Will stares up at him blankly in the naked silence, jaw working, pulse quick and fluttering. He casts a sidelong glance at the wooden tub a few feet away, full and steaming. Welcoming. He wets his lips, sighs. The most damning hidden marks on his body are already exposed and he's not particularly inclined toward bashfulness about the rest. He kicks off his boots and shoves his braies down his thighs, stands naked before Lecter plastered in blood and sweat and grime and steps into the water. Sinks down.

"Very good, Will. Thank you." Lord Hannibal rolls up his sleeves past the elbow, perches behind Will and takes up a ewer to pour jugfuls of the water over his shoulders, the crown of his head. Will keeps silent, afraid that a stray sound or a breath will break the odd spell. He goes on playacting at solicitude, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, humming softly as he works. A fine-woven linen cloth pats away the blood matted to Will's clavicle, leaving only the jagged ring of tearing and bruising incised by the wolf's teeth. Pain eases a little as the warmth of the water numbs.

Strong fingers begin to lather soap into his hair, knead tenderly at his scalp. Will's already shallow breaths go thready and rough. Heat prickles at the corners of his eyes, flares high in his cheeks. The water he floats in is so warm, bearing him up like an ember on a draft of flame, but there are fierce shivers still trembling down the length of his spine.

The clawing restlessness churns behind his ribs, rises in his throat and threatens to spill over in something like a sob. When he can swallow it down no longer Will lets his head fall back into the cradle of Lecter's hands and asks feebly, "What are you doing?"

He can hear the smile in his voice. "Which part of my conduct evades your understanding?"

"You're mercurial," Will elaborates with a flat hum. "It's just hard to know where I am with you."

"Your theory of my motivations is fragmented. It foments distrust." The light richness of his tone carries amusement rather than insult. "Especially difficult for you, given that understanding has always come so easily before. Perceived contradictions in my behavior strike you as impulsive. Fickle."

Will shakes his head. "Fluid," he corrects. "Not carelessness so much as… whimsy." He wets his lips again, tastes soap and iron, stinging and sour. "Your motivations stay constant, while the approach shifts."

A thumb presses behind his ear, near the carotid where the blood pulses under the skin. "Can you determine the fixed factors?"

He furrows his brow, turns the gem of the question over until the right facet gleams in the low light. “You’re curious what will happen.”

Lord Lecter contemplates this, quietly massaging at the roots of his hair. “You were already well aware of my curiosity about you.”

Will concedes that with a nod, bobs lower beneath the surface to let the water lap at the hollow of his throat. “*You’ve* become aware of more than you let on,” he says a little petulantly.

The hand in his hair draws his head back with a firm pressure, throat arching, until his nape makes contact with the edge of the tub. Lecter’s mouth is twitching in a soft smile. “I did not wish to rush headlong into any swift judgment,” he admits. “Tell me, how is Mason?”

Will is silent, maybe a little sullen, looking up and schooling his face into a stony mask. Lord Hannibal takes up the cloth and cleans away more of the grime from the scrapes and scratches across his cheeks. “Do all your hunts double as a trial by ordeal?”

Hannibal laughs. “My trials are much more varied than that. But I found the symbolism most appropriate in your case.” The cleaning pauses and he casts a glance down at the livid scarring of the brand for the first time. Presses a fingertip to the skin. “A collar would do well enough for a bloodhound, don't you think?”

Cold, mordant anger bubbles in Will’s throat and comes out in a quiet scoff. “Collar isn't *permanent* enough. A dog can slip a leash, get away. This mark could only be cut out.”

“And take a pound of flesh with it?”

“Ideally,” he agrees and lets his eyes fall shut. His jaw tightens, incrementally. “Behaviorism is the favored philosophy. Bad dogs are taught a lesson. Mad dogs are put down.”

He ducks his head down beneath the water to rinse away the suds, bates his breath and hesitates, just a moment, curious to see if Hannibal might choose his moment now, lean closer and hold him under until he stops struggling. He wonders if he reached out quick enough, if he could grasp him by the collar and drag him under like a vengeful river-hag. If he wants to.

Then he breaks the surface again and finds him only watching, patient and pensieve. Eyes shining.

Hannibal cocks his head and reaches for one of Will’s hands, lifts it out of the water to examine the shallow gash across the palm where he gripped the knife by the blade, then turns it over to catalog the split skin of his knuckles. “A time-honored principle,” he remarks. “Assuming that good behavior begets its own rewards.”

“Wouldn’t know much about that, my Lord,” Will says dryly. “I’m not a good dog.”

That earns him a flash of white teeth as a cotton dressing winds around the width of his hand. “We might lay blame for that on an error in perspective, I think,” Hannibal replies, low and warm. “You make an excellent wolf.”

There’s nothing he can find the inclination to say to that. Another involuntary tremor shudders down his spine and he looks away, turns the thought over as Lecter cleans and bandages his other hand in turn, then begins dressing the wound on his shoulder.
Will bears it until he can go on no longer. He reaches up, catches at Lecter’s wrist with numb fingers and asks straight out. "Am I due a punishment, now, my Lord? Or a reward?"

Any hint of expression slides off Lecter's face and leaves behind a beat of emptiness before a new light flares in his wine-dark eyes. He twines his fingers around Will's wrist in turn, reaches up to brush away a dripping curl at his temple. "My Will," he says, so soft that something in his chest aches with it. "Don't you know? You did very well. I'm enormously pleased with you." He presses his mouth to the flat of Will's palm and then takes his face in both hands, draws him in and sets another kiss against his forehead.

Reassurance doesn't stop the jittery shaking of Will's shoulders. It makes it worse by virtue of the way his heart quickens in response to the praise. He feels unbalanced, brittle, torn between the want for more and the impulse to flee from his gentle veneration and how unsteady it makes him feel. When Lecter's lips leave his skin he tilts his whole face up, hungrily, and catches his mouth like it holds the only air in the room. Will feels soft skin and the scrape of stubble, the hot slide of a tongue as the kiss deepens, takes on a ferocious edge. It stays toothless, for all he wants to taste blood. Wants to lose himself in the feverish darkness of all he can take and more of Hannibal, Hannibal, *Hannibal–*

He recognizes, with no small chagrin at his relentless eagerness, that the heat rising in his face is matched by an insistent stirring further below. The base *physicality* of his appetite where Lord Lecter is concerned startles him anew, and he revisits the urge to pull him in closer and drag him under as a desire to feel the weight of Hannibal's lean body pressed against his own. Realizes he's growing hard at the thought. Will swallows thickly as the hands on his face keep him from turning away.

Without glancing down, a knowing tilt widens the smile on Lecter's face and his eyes crease in quiet satisfaction. Will's eyes flicker to the thin white scar across his throat. Maddening that he bears Will's marks the same way Will bears his.

"The first moment I saw you, at the tournament lists," he crows, softly, brushing his fingers over the stubble on Will's jaw. "You were haloed in sunlight, your armor spattered in heart's blood. Like a god of death, all wrought in vengeful fire. Beautiful."

Before he loses balance any further, Will sucks in a quiet breath and determines to unbalance him right back. "Brought you a gift," he whispers. Hannibal's brow tilts up in question, and Will gestures with a nod. "In the satchel."

The hands cupping his jaw loosen and pull away as Lecter stands to retrieve the leather bag where it had fallen by the divan. He examines the offering waiting inside, packed in snow to keep the meat fresh.

He looks, the same abstruse mask shuttering over his face, and takes up the trophy in his hands, the color dark and rich with a smooth sheen.

"A wolf's liver," he says softly, after a beat of anticipation, "Is not typically so large as this."

Will licks his lips, still tender, still itching for another taste. "I hear you're partial to bigger game. You seemed fond enough of him before."

Lecter's eyes go briefly narrower, considering. "It has been a long time since I partook of flesh I felt any particular fondness for."

He hums, replies a little snidely: "Palates can always be broadened, I hear."

The flat emptiness of Lecter's countenance sharpens again into a softly pleased smile and he tucks the organ neatly back into its packaging. "Well," he croons. "It seems I am to have an old friend for

dinner. It may be a last minute arrangement, but I should like it if you would stay and dine with me, Will."

Will catches a glimpse of his wavering reflection in the surface of the water. He finds a perfect mirror of the same half-smile, like Lecter is looking out from behind his eyes. And isn't that what he's after? Reshaping Will in his image, the way a sword is forged, held in the fire and peined and quenched. Made stronger and sharper for the process. All the better to kill with.

He tilts his head. "Where else would I go?"

Chapter End Notes

hehehe they're gonna have.....dinner..... ;)

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

chapter specific notes HMM I mean. there's a little more animal death and of course some cannibalism, which you might expect, and also just a lot of explicit gay sex.....damn....happy pride huh?

Might skip a week on posting next Saturday on account of I am moving house but I won't deny I'm VERY likely to be back with more before the fortnight is out so I guess look out! watch ur back! maybe subscribe in case I drop the next update at a completely random day and time!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will lights taper candles as Lord Hannibal sets down their plates, heavy laden with the spoils of the hunt. “Liver is a tender cut, and is best prepared delicately. Soaked in milk to allay the bitter flavor. Dredged in flour and in spices, but leaving the salt until it is ready to serve, or the flesh may harden.”

Will considers Lecter’s presentation of his trophy, the rich and savory aroma in the air mingled with the oaky woodsmoke from the hearth. The dualistic qualities of hunt and feast, the wild brought in from the howling winter wind and displayed on a silver platter. Agrestal.

“What about heart?” He welcomes himself to a chair, watches with a heavy, half-lidded look as Lord Hannibal pours the wine. “How would that compare? Hardier?”

“Leaner,” he agrees mildly. “Versatile, more giving of itself, and perhaps the lesser for that generosity. I like your choice. I am optimistic you will not repent of it.”

He sits opposite Will, the fire flickering behind him, and does not move to eat, entirely focused on watching Will. His eyes linger on the slide of a knife parting flesh, the bob and flex of a throat around a mouthful of wine. Very nearly impatient.

Will expects to falter at the first bite, but the trespass comes as second nature, the same way killing had. Easy. He consumes and finds the flavor complex: savory and wild and gamey. “It’s good.”

Lord Hannibal carves into his own portion, but mostly, still, he watches, eyes black and intent. “A good meal nourishes the spirit as well as the body,” he says meaningfully and savors the first mouthful. “The feast is life.”

“Life after death,” Will murmurs with a coy flicker of a look and raises a brow. “Destruction and creation. Transformative. I see the appeal.”

Hannibal watches him carve a second bite and place it on his tongue with a smile. His face goes keen with hunger. He sets down his fork.

“Is there something else,” he says, with care, “That you want of me, Will?”

Will wets his lips. “The same thing you want, I think.”

“Presumptuous.”

“Anticipatory,” he murmurs around a slow, languid mouthful of wine. “And optimistic.”

Lord Hannibal stands, circles the table with the fire still blazing at his back until he is stood directly in front of Will, reaching out to take the cup from his hand. “If you are certain,” he bids and raises it to his mouth. “Best to be direct.”

Will watches him with hunger burning bright in the pit of his stomach. He reaches out and Lecter bends down to meet him, braced against the back of the chair, Will’s fingers grasping his shirtfront. “My Lord,” he rasps, his voice low and prickling with heat. Then, as much breath as sound, “Won’t you take me to bed?”

With one coppery kiss Lecter hauls him upright and abandons their food more or less entirely to lay him out across the surface of the canopy bed and set to sating a new appetite, shed garments strewn haphazardly across the floor as they go. Will traces his bandaged palms hungrily over the curve of his bare spine as Hannibal kisses him hard, harder, presses him down into the blankets and leaves his lips bruised with rathe ardor. Scrapes teeth along the jumping pulse in his neck and then turns him flat on his stomach and pins him there.

“Oh,” Will huffs, settling with his belly pressed to the silk sheets, blissfully cool against the prickling heat of his skin. “Oh, *fuck*.”

“A little courtesy, please, Will,” Lord Hannibal chastens, close enough to his ear for the gust of his breath to raise the hair on the nape of his neck, make him shiver and shift restlessly against the slippery give of the fabric. “Be good.”

Strong hands clutch at his hips, squeeze generously at his ass and then spread and bare his opening, choking a rough, startled gasp from his mouth alongside the aforementioned cursing.

“Ghh–” Will manages eloquently and then thumps his temple *hard* into the mattress and grasps desperate fistfuls of the blankets when he feels the first wet slide of a tongue, shocking and slick. His jaw trembles fitfully as he works to reign in the oaths that threaten to burst out of him, heart hammering, thighs tensing. He rubs off against the sheets again, hips shifting indecently into the give of the bed and back against the hot press of Lecter’s mouth. “My Lord,” he pants, because he has to say something or he’ll *scream*.

“Under the circumstances,” comes the reply, warm with a rumbling laugh. “I think you’d better call me Hannibal, don’t you?”

A wet, sucking kiss against his hole makes him cry out, shut his eyes against the intensity of the sensation, like being eaten alive. He grits his teeth, lets slip a slow, ragged whine, and then, brazen, “How do I taste? Better than your huntsman?”

Hannibal growls, grips him by the waist and tugs his hips back sharply against his face, laving harshly and then splitting Will open with his tongue, relentless and deep. Will has to turn his face into the blankets, jaw working for something to bite down around.

His back bows and his prick bobs against his stomach, flushed dark, leaking messily, but he doesn't reach down to palm it. Can't make himself loose his grip on the sheets, first, and half expects that if he tried Lord Lecter would forbid it.

It occurs to Will with a dizzy rush that he wants to hear him say it.

“Hannibal,” he moans, rutting into the bed. “Hannibal, touch me, I need you to–”

“Be still,” comes the sharp reply, quick and assertive, enough to make the blood roar in Will’s ears. Teeth nip at the soft flesh of his upper thigh, chastising. “Insatiable, headstrong thing. Take what I give you.”

He resumes tongue-fucking Will with an unrelenting, painstaking fortitude, until he’s gasping wetly and boneless and open as a sunken well. “Yes,” he grunts, “Yes, yes, H-Hannibal, *hell*, that feels so. So.”

Another short, halfhearted tut at the profanity, but Hannibal doesn’t chide him any further, pulling back to slide the pad of his thumb over the fluttering rim of his hole, dip shallowly inside, gauging how easy Will takes him. Will knows it must be easy. How could it be otherwise, when Hannibal already opened up a space for himself in Will’s body years ago, carved him apart and reshaped him. He tries to dredge up the hate and can only find hunger, fierce and clawing, tearing at the old wound from the inside, and as his chest heaves he has the strangest feeling of the scar across his belly unknitting itself under Hannibal’s touch, set to bleeding freely, gouts and gouts, an ocean of himself pouring out without end.

“Come on,” he invites, pressing his stomach down into the sheets and parting his thighs as provocatively as he can manage, glancing back over his shoulder at Hannibal. “Come on, my Lord, fill me up.”

Hannibal’s eyes are darker than he’s ever seen them, bright as coals in the reflected firelight, and to Will’s satisfaction he can make out the free hand squeezing at the base of his cock, thumbing the underside of the shaft with avidity. “Very pretty,” he says, low in his throat. “Ask me again.”

“Please,” he acquiesces, voice going thin and trembling at the ache between his legs, the unbearable emptiness that's been hollowed in him. “Inside me, Hannibal, please.”

“Hush,” Hannibal murmurs, as though forgetting he asked for the show of desperation in the first place. Stroking the length of Will’s back, pressing down between his shoulderblades as he rises over him. “You’ll have me, Will. I’ll give you what you need.”

His solid, leonine weight drapes over Will, pins him down, nuzzling at the sweat-damp nape of his neck, inhaling the scent there in a blatant, quiet huff. He reaches past Will for a delicate dark glass bottle of fragrant oil, one of the most conspicuously lavish objects he’s ever laid eyes on in his life, in a sparse history of generally unremarkable liaisons, quick and fumbling. Will has never done this. He’s hitched a woman's skirts up around her waist or knelt to unlace a man’s breeches in the kind of humble surroundings that tend to leave loose bits of hay caught in someone’s hair. It never felt like this. Opulent, elaborate buggery in a nobleman's velvet-shrouded canopy bed is a difficult thing to compare. A new thing.

Will shields his face against the crook of his arm and breathes, sultry and shallow, shivers at the slow runnel of skin-warmed oil dripping across his rim, Hannibal’s careful fingers smear it over his hole, slip into the greedy clutch of it and out again, very nearly teasing.

Still, still when he presses closer, nudges the thick head of his cock against his opening and in and *in*, it's unbearable, it's too much and not enough at once. Will groans, long and thin, distantly surprised at the high pitch of the sound. His hands slip and slide against the bedsheets, faltering and then reaching back to dig his nails into Hannibal’s flank.

“*God*,” he pants. “*Oh*, god it’s so–I need–”

“Exquisite,” Hannibal breathes, and his palm is resting at the base of Will’s neck like he’s gentling a wild animal, a tender touch in contrast to the acute torment of being speared open. He rocks his hips in a few gentle, shifting thrusts, sinking in deeper, so slow and relentless that Will feels like the ache of it will go on forever. He clutches tighter to anything he can reach, gasping moans turning rough as sobs, pulse skipping and racing. Hannibal’s voice takes on a rough, thick timbre. “Look how you take me. The heat and *vise* of you, Will. Drawing me in, so ravenous for more.”

Will shudders, vision blurring with the drip of sweat over his face. “Don’t–don’t stop.”

“Never,” Hannibal vows and fills him up, splits him so wide apart that he feels the strain in his fucking *eyeteeth*, sinks in until his stones smack the back of Will’s thighs and shifts that hand on his nape up into his hair, taking a fistful between his knuckles and pulling taut.

“Ah!” Will shouts; there are sharp, hiccuping sounds drawn out of him with the apex of every rocking thrust. The steel-hardness of his prick softened a little as his body sought to acclimate to the intrusion, but now he feels the ache as dull and pounding as ever, red and dripping, grinding helplessly with his length trapped between his belly and the sheets. “Hannibal,” he moans, just to say it, just to hold the name in his mouth like honeycomb.

Sweat and perfume, clean leather and pine smoke burn in his lungs, and when Will lifts his head he can see the dancing shadows of a crown of antlers play across the canopy in the firelight. He feels the horned hunter’s bloodstained hands on him everywhere, sliding across his throat, his waist, his stomach. Palming the head of his cock and making a pleased sound at the slickness of it. Will keens and pushes up onto his hands and knees, spreads his thighs wide and wanton, and Hannibal acquiesces, makes a tight channel of his fingers for Will to fuck into. The shift in angle only serves to drive Hannibal in still deeper, makes Will clench and shudder around him in shivers of want. His wounded shoulder throbs viciously, a sharp sting for every place teeth dug in and tore, but the pain is only another heat, another pulsing ache.

“There,” he gasps weakly when the searing, heavy stretch turns to liquid warmth in his gut. The dull weight of Hannibal’s cock slides against the right angle to focus all the buzzing, swirling pleasure inside him into a bright flare of fire and then keeps hitting it again and again. “There, please, yes, oh *god*–” He rocks into Hannibal’s grip and back into the buffeting impact of his thrusts, every muscle locked tight and beginning to quiver with the strain. Only noticing that his legs are shaking when one of Hannibal’s palms slides over the outside of his thigh to ease the tremor. Or maybe intending to ease nothing, only to revel in the satisfaction of pushing Will’s body past every limit a dozen times in the span of a day.

Nearly over the last limit he can bear, the blood pounds in Will’s ears, loud enough to drown out whatever wild, debauched noises are pouring from his throat unchecked. He feels a precipice rush up to meet him, feet slipping on the unsteady earth, but Hannibal is not so eager to help him tumble over the edge as the last time they stood on a high ledge together. His grasp on Will shifts even as his balls go tight and draw up, stopping his peak with a well-placed squeeze around the shaft and holding him back by force. The other arm locks firmly against Will’s chest, tugs him upright, straining and heaving, cursing and spitting.

“Ah, *fuck*,” Will shouts, clawing furiously at Hannibal’s forearm, throwing his head back. “God*damnit*.”

The arm across his sternum flexes, Hannibal’s mouth ravishing the nape of his neck, laughing low and warm over the dull sting of his handiwork. “Easy,” he soothes. “Patience, Will. Good things to those who wait.”

He shakes his head plaintively, vision swimming. “I can’t.”

“You can,” he assures, grinding slow and lush where he’s buried deep. Will feels every inch like a blade, like teeth tearing until they scrape bone. “You will, for me.”

Will’s head lolls to the side and he takes a shaking breath, grappling for the last shreds of his self control. He sighs softly and pushes himself up on trembling legs, then sinks back onto his cock, impaling himself with a short, sharp cry. “Yes, my Lord.”

“There you are,” Hannibal says with a pleased groan that rumbles in his chest. He looses his grip on Will’s prick to a soft, easy glide, featherlight, spreading the slick mess of his wetness and the perfumed oil over the shaft. “Good boy, Will. Very good.”

Will has just enough presence of mind to whine at *that*, though it sounds much more like an encouragement than a proper protest.

Taking his pleasure is arduous work, unforgiving, every shift of his body a burning ache, sweat dripping down the hollow of his spine. Hannibal makes quiet noises of approval and gratification as he fists Will’s cock in a gentle glissade. Grips him tight only when Will clenches tight around him in turn, quick only when he manages to rock his hips in a brisker rhythm. “*Hannibal*,” he pleads in a throaty whisper.

“My wolf,” he lilts, tracing the shape of Will’s slack mouth with the pads of his fingers and *oh*, Will finds that deep, harsh angle again, the strike of flint and tinder, and it all ignites into so much heat and light–

He sobs gratefully as he comes in eager jerking splatters that slide between Hannibal’s fingers and spread over his cock, shakes and shudders in his arms, only realizing when the frantic pounding of his heart slows to a gentle thunder that his teeth are grinding hard against the bend of Hannibal’s knuckles. Biting the hand that fed him.

This doesn't seem to have a discouraging effect on Lord Lecter, who takes the bruised, abraded skin in with a nearly inaudible hum, and then shoves Will face down on the bed and pounds into him so hard and fast that the corners of his vision go dark.

Hannibal groans, spilling inside him in a blood-churning rush of heat, and chokes out a few harsh syllables – not in their common tongue, but Will recognizes the timbre of profanity when he hears it. He slumps to press his forehead to the divot between Will’s shaking shoulderblades. When he leaves Will’s body he feels his rim clench like it wants to draw him back again, even bruised and red and dripping sweat and oil and spend.

It takes a moment to catch his breath. A much longer moment than that to do anything but breathe and lie boneless under Hannibal’s weight. Finally he rolls away too, sits back against the downy nest of pillows with his straw-and-silver hair fallen loose over his forehead. He regards Will with half-lidded, wine-dark eyes.

Will licks his lips. There's salt and copper to the taste there. “Give up on courtesy?” he says, sportive.

“I prefer not to make a habit of uncivil language,” Hannibal’s mouth curves in an echo of a smile. “But occasionally vulgarity is the only thing that will do.”

Shifting onto his side with a tender full-body wince, Will lets his head roll lazily. “I’m not civil company.”

“No,” Hannibal’s brow quirks and his hand cards through the sweat-mussed mop of Will’s hair, playful. Petting. “You are wild.”

The old mordancy rushes in to dry up all Will’s post-coital ease. “A mad dog,” he avers, with thin humor.

“Storms are wild, and very frequently destructive. Still foolish to try and make it tame, or turn it from its natural path.” Will’s grimace fades to shades of bewilderment and a little outright disbelief, but Hannibal’s face draws in focused and serious. “I would not have you leashed, Will.”

His mouth falls into a frown, remembering the lymer wolves. “But you would have me hunt for you.”

Hannibal’s eyes blow darker than before. “Yes,” he breathes, half-reverent.

“As I’ve hunted for Lord Verger.”

The expected flash of anger doesn't follow, but something in Hannibal's face is suddenly cold and distant. “As you *used* to hunt for Mason Verger,” he corrects, softly. Dangerously.

Will can’t hold back a dry laugh, turning into the hand still carding through his hair until Hannibal’s fingers curl loosely over his throat. “I had a collar looped around my neck like a snare,” he says. “Don’t mistake that for loyalty. I’m here and I am with you now, my Lord, not with House Verger.”

Hannibal adjusts his grip to something more firm, leans down and examines his face from every angle, searching, curious. Will watches his mien closely and gains no insight, fails to find a fracture or a gasp of clarity in the frozen lake of his stark affect. But in his own time the distance diminishes.

“And when you hear my hunting horn blow,” he murmurs thoughtfully. “Will you come running, Will?”

Turning his face aside, pressing his nose into the inside of Hannibal’s wrist, against the slow drumbeat of his pulse, Will smiles. “Oh yes.”

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The world is a web of spun threads layered one over the other like ripples in a stream, and in the edges of the tapestry Will is a hare springing through the thistles. There is a fox close on his tail, grinning and red, teeth flashing white, and if it catches him, it will eat him.

If it catches him, it will eat him, which he always knew, but he is still the one who chose to begin the chase. He is in control. He is the one who gauges every springing leap to make sure he never bounds too far out of sight. A very tricky balancing act to stay just close enough to danger to keep it snapping happily at his heels but never let it close the final distance.

The motif around the border of the arras follows itself forever without a start or end, but he has a destination in mind. A thicket, just around the bend of the river, where the clover grows lush and verdant over the bank and the fish hide in the cool water beneath the hollows of mossy stones. Where an archer waits hidden just out of sight, her bowstring pulled back to rest against the corner of her smiling mouth.

Will-the-hare scrambles under the trunk of a fallen oak and through a course of tangled vines embroidered in green silk, and his rabbit heart pounds in his chest as he catches a glimpse of the

archer's sea-glass eyes, her freckled face, the river of crimson dripping down the front of her kirtle, wool thread dyed red as ruby.

The fox's jaw closes around him like a vise, snapping bone and tearing flesh, snatching him out of the air mid-leap. Will turns his black eyes to smile at his killer, triumphant. He falls, but they fall together, the archer's aim true as it ever was, her arrow stuck deep into the fox's heart.

Will wakes with the same ruthless smile on his lips.

He pulls on a borrowed tunic, deep red linen that sits on his skin like a whisper, finer than anything he's ever worn. Hannibal watches him dress and tug the curtain aside with a languid kind of interest, summons him back for one more slow, careful kiss as he goes, drawing Will's lower lip between his teeth and worrying a bruise into the thin flesh. He lies back and lets him slip away into the night.

Will drifts through the dark halls of the hold like a waking dreamer, a ghost and a shadow and the last strain of an old song fading on the wind. The candle in his hand flickers softly as he walks.

A hairpin turn at the kitchen, down the next windowless hall, half underground and down a set of shallow stone stairs, and he reaches the tapestry. Stands for a long while just looking at it, eyes tracing over the weave of the threads, searching without quite knowing, consciously, what he's looking for.

Will shuts his eyes, watches the hunters and their quarry move in reverse across the canvas of cloth until they disappear into the trees and the trees sink into the earth and the earth sinks into the water. Unravels the warp and weft string by string and winds the ribbon of color back into a clew. Turns it over in his hand, and bends to set the candle down at his feet.

"I built this place according to my own needs. Chose my own title. Carved my niche into the world," he whispers. His voice is thick and strange in his own ears. Softer, the consonants more gently clipped. Will strides closer, lifts his hand to trace along the dagged edge of the arras, feeling the give of the heavy, close-woven wool. Slips his hand underneath to lift the fabric away and touch the stone wall beneath.

Will's eyes slide open again and he traces the pads of his fingers slowly over the seam in the stone, then breathes out slowly.

"I create myself and I am more than a man. A horned god of the hunt, always hungry. The feast is life. I give life and I take it away." He swallows. "I have lived under siege once. When the battle comes to my door again, I will not sit behind these walls in safety and starve." Half the wall is stone and part is only painted to resemble it, at a glance, in low light. A blind archway a little taller and a little wider than a man. "I built this place according to my needs. There is more than one way out of Ravenstag." Will flattens his palm against it and pushes.

The hidden door slides open with a silent huff on well-oiled hinges, shows the mouth of a long tunnel beyond, dark and yawning.

"A way out," he echoes, in a voice a little more like his own, "Is a way in."

When Will bends to retrieve the candle from the floor by his feet and lifts it into the darkness, he feels the breeze on his face and watches the flame flicker and sputter out.

Chapter End Notes

THERE we go...got another completed arc under our belts...WHAT will happen next and HOW much more of it is gonna be horny? I know all about it but you will simply have to trust me that it's gonna continue to be good and fun at least for me the guy writing it.

Also chapter count DID change a little bc I fleshed out my outline again and that is still largely aspirational. 20 would be a really nice round number! Length estimation is...ALSO in flux bc I was like 'oh surely about 50k' and I am just now hitting 50k with the whole third act left SO. I'd say it will be longer. which is a problem that I LOVE to have frankly I should have that problem more often

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

> OKAY moving went well AND I had a birthday and I started full time at work and I have been Wiped The Fuck Out from that but I ALSO once again have written a fun arc that I enjoyed and want to put it in front of other people's eyes SO. fuck all of that we're back on fic posting hours on schedule!
>
> content warnings: yeah I don't think anything specific comes up here except, of course, that there is graphic sexual content again thank GOD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What," Beverly whispers, as they stand at attention side by side, "Is *that*?"

Will frowns and shrugs the question off, but she nudges him in the side with an elbow. He glances in her direction and sees her eyebrow arched pointedly up, her mouth set in a thin, stern line. He sighs.

"What is what?"

"Oh, come on," she crows. Her eyes drop from Will's face to just below, where the leather brigandine meets the corner of his jaw before he takes her meaning. "I mean that if that's not a suck-bruise on your neck you're gonna have a hell of a time convincing me."

He flushes darkly, ducks his chin low under his collar and looks straight ahead, keeping his eyes fixed on the procession coming through the gates.

"You sly dog!" Beverly's whisper takes on a smug edge and he can hear the grin in her voice. "Don't hold out on me now, Graham, who have you been shaking the sheets with? Inquiring minds want to know."

"You sound like Freddie Lounds," Will grunts, irritably, and Beverly rolls her eyes.

"Alright," she huffs. "Don't tell me. Probably better for maintaining that mysterious allure you love to project, anyway."

"I'm not projecting anything," Will gripes under his breath. He can see Beverly's mouth twitch in his peripheral vision anyway,

"Keep telling yourself that." She waggles her eyebrows. "I have my guesses, anyway."

The riders at the head of the convoy dismount, circling to help the noblewoman with the fair, solemn face slide off her horse in a cascade of skirts, save for one rider who only stands by with a cocky half-smile and a jaunty kind of ease. Hannibal, crowned in a bronze circlet of branching antlers, strides forward to greet her with his usual warm hospitality, raises one of her gloved hands to his lips and takes his time to bid the whole party welcome.

It’s not an especially cold day to stand around the courtyard watching the pomp and circumstance of courtly ceremony, but Will finds himself shifting restlessly on his feet anyway, until a break in the pattern catches his attention. Lord Lecter makes the polite and distant motions of every introduction to the lady and her entourage, but when he locks eyes with one of the half-dozen faceless guards that came with her, he falters and stops in his tracks. Will sees the smile start in his eyes, but it lightens his whole face almost in an instant, grows to a real flash of white teeth and an almost boyish animation. He looks back to the noblewoman and beckons her escort on into the keep, not quite hurried enough to be improper but quicker than he would in any other moment, and strides forward to clasp the guard woman by the arms, familiar, effusive in his pleasure.

“Lady Bedelia’s supposed to be his Lordship’s oldest friend,” Beverly hums in his ear, soft with surprise. “She was here when he built this place. He visits her once a year at least, writes a lot of long letters. I don’t know the woman in the armor, though. Never seen her before.”

Will looks at the stranger, petite and birdlike under the dark leathers, short hair pulled into a knot at the nape of her neck. The way she turns her wide, dark eyes on Lord Hannibal like a devotee, the way Hannibal looks at her with the echo of a man decades younger. Different as sun and moon, plainly no blood shared between them, but still a kind of unmistakable, close bond–

“She’s family,” he says with a tilt of his head. “Has to be.”

A faint frown dips the line of Bev’s mouth. “Lord Lecter doesn’t have any living family, officially.”

“Well, then,” Will shrugs. “She’s the *un*official kind.”

They watch the last of the visitors walk through the castle doors, stablehands leading the animals away, guards trailing behind. Beverly makes a sound low in her throat like she’s trying to swallow down a thought and then lets it slip anyway. “You, uh, know something about that? Unofficial family?”

A tight, sour feeling sticks in Will’s craw and he furrows his brow at the ground. “From experience, you mean?” he rasps. “Asking if I know what a bastard looks like because I am one?"

“No. Yes. Fuck, sorry, I just–” She laughs, pained. “Stuck my foot right in it, there, huh?”

“You think?” He sighs, rolls the tension out of his shoulders, casts her a bleak look. “Yeah, not… not like that. No noblemen who would welcome me with open arms.” A sympathetic wince twists the corner of her mouth and Will brushes it off, shakes his head. “It’s the way things are. Most don’t stay on speaking terms with their bloodline’s by-blows, if you can believe it. Lord Lecter might be the exception.”

Bev huffs. “He usually is,” she agrees, knocking her elbow into Will’s vambrace in a quiet apology.

“A category all to himself.”

“Unique. And a little solitary,” she says. “You’re the same way, which is probably why his Lordship is so fond of you.”

Something in Will’s stomach twists near-violently at that and he digs his fingernails into his palms to keep the reaction from darkening his face. It feels true, the right kind of truth to be vexing, to itch under his skin. “We are identically different.”

Beverly stands suddenly to attention again, her smile growing smaller and more secretive, and she knocks Will with her elbow again, this time catching him under the ribs. "*Speaking* of nobles with a soft spot for you…." Will follows the subtle flick of her gaze toward the figure approaching their post with a light, buoyant step and a brindled hound at her heels. Lady Alana smiles warmly and offers up a steaming mug of mulled wine, hot and fragrant. Beverly wraps her hands around it with enthusiasm and a sly grin. "Oh, Lady, you are a *saint*."

"Thought you might want something to ward off the chill," she explains, one free hand patting at Cavall as the dog noses the heaving hanging sleeve of her bliaut. Her crystal-bright eyes dance away and she continues, nearly hesitant, "I didn't want to ambush you."

Will's tentative smile flattens out a little and he shifts on his feet. "Ambush away."

Alana stands taller, clears her throat. "Could I borrow you for a moment?"

He inclines his head. Beverly, sipping at the wine, snickers and throws him a quick bawdy wink. "Go on, Graham, your turn to ward off the chill now," she mutters under her breath. "Bring him back in one piece, Lady Bloom!" She adds, directed to Alana and not at all subtle about her meaning.

Will wills away the prickling flush that rises to his face at the teasing and leaves his post to follow Alana across the battlements, gait still hitching a little from the overexertion of the hunt. Or else from what came afterward. Alana's mouth twitches. "Should I have reassured Beverly that I won't bite?"

"She wouldn't take your word for it," Will says, gruff and pink-faced, then huffs. "She thinks I'm warming your bed."

Alana's cheeks go a little pinker, too, and she glances away. "Ah."

"I didn't want to explain–"

"I'm sorry," she interrupts, stopping mid-stride, turning to face him. "I shouldn't have – it's not fair to you for me to act like…." Her eyes shine a little, soft as starlight, lovely and just as distant. "What I said to you before at Port Haven, that hasn't changed. Other things have changed, but that can't. Still."

"I know," he says, dully, bristling at the reminder.

Alana swallows. "We belong to different worlds, Will. I could only ever have an affair with you," she echoes. "Nothing lasting or real. And I don't… it would feel dishonest. To promise you something I can't give."

"I'm not asking," Will answers in a hoarse riposte. "I wouldn't – she made an assumption, Alana, that's all."

A beat of lingering quiet, where Will keeps his chin tucked under his collar, but Alana must catch the bruising at the shifting of the light, because her countenance goes blank. "Why? Because you're already having an affair?"

A bitter facsimile of a smile burns across Will's face and his jaw tightens. "Would you be angry with me if I was?"

"No," she denies, and then, "No, of course not. I don't presume to have any kind of right to dictate–" Her mouth worries into a thin line. "Concerned, maybe, if it was someone with undue influence or – if it seemed like you were being importuned, or–"

Will laughs. “No one is *importuning* me, Alana, we’re… indulging a mutual interest.”

Recognition blazes in her face, a swift, sharp flare. “It’s Lord Hannibal?” When Will makes no move to confirm or deny the guess, because truly she doesn't need it, her brow furrows. “Will,” she warns. “Hannibal isn’t in a position to offer you anything lasting, either.”

“I don't need him to.”

“Still,” she says. “Still, I should have a word with him. There are boundaries, strictures of duty and expectation – it’s, it’s *reckless* to brush them off and act as if you were an equal and not a servant– ”

“Alana,” Will cuts in, blood running hot and then cold with an old, deep-rooted bitterness. “Please. You don’t need to protect me.”

“I just,” Alana stammers and takes a soft breath, her gaze dropping quickly to his mouth. “Don’t want to see you hurt. I’ve never wanted to see you hurt.”

Will exhales soft through his nose and leans away before either of them are tempted to lean closer instead. To kiss her here and now would only be a complication they sorely don't need. He can feel the echoes of how desperately she wants to kiss him despite all her misgivings, fraught with a kind of pitched certainty that it may be her last chance. “Do you worry more if I will be safe from him, my Lady? Or safe for you?”

It's a deliberate streak of ruthlessness that makes him half-sneer it, but the show of teeth works instantly to banish the badly hidden yearning from her countenance, replace it with wary distance.

“I wanted,” she says, with a disjointed fragment of a sigh. Starting over, trying her best to put the whole matter behind her, though her teeth still worry at her bottom lip hard enough to bruise the pink skin to a flushed red. “I wanted to ask you if you would keep an eye on Lady Bedelia’s courtiers. There are a few strangers among them, new faces, people I think we should be cautious of.”

“Officially?” Will asks, solemn, “Or unofficially?”

“More a feeling than a concrete suspicion,” Alana admits, her hand falling to Cavall again, petting absently at her ears, over her snout. “Freddie’s away on her own business, or I’d bring this to her instead of troubling you.”

“Doesn’t trouble me,” he asserts, maybe a little too much lingering vexation in the flatness of his voice. “It’s only my duty, isn’t it? To protect and serve my liege lord?”

Alana sighs, long and low, and her face falls. “Have I offended you, Will?”

“Don’t,” Will grits out, and scrapes into a stiff bow. “Don’t trouble yourself with my feelings, Lady Bloom, and I will not burden you with them again.” He turns on his heel, something still unsettled and restless beneath his skin. He has every intention of returning sullenly to his post for the first half a dozen paces. But in half a dozen more all the restlessness boils over and he has, all at once, a better destination in mind.

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The door to Hannibal’s solar swings open as he approaches it and Will steps back to let the small, dark-eyed guard from Bedelia’s retinue slip past. She looks him over with a sharp, wary glance as

their shoulders brush, and then a nod of greeting. Will turns back to the doorway and to Hannibal, standing just past the threshold, still crowned in his antlered circlet and robed in dark crimson velvet.

“Thank you, Chiyoh,” he calls after the departing guest and then, with a bijou smile slanting his way. “Will. What a pleasant surprise.”

Will opens his mouth to speak and finds nothing but a rough, wordless sound of frustration trapped under his tongue. He doesn’t quite shoulder past Hannibal, but strides purposefully into the room, far too much as though he belongs there. He feels out of balance, reckless and unmoored, grasping wildly for something to give him solid footing.

Hannibal watches him pace with an expression of mild interest, meandering back to the table and the remains of the meal sitting on it, measuring out a cup of wine with a patient, curious air. Will scrapes his palm across the rough hair on his chin, then sighs and takes the goblet from his hand.

“Well,” he says as Will drinks. “You must tell me what inspired this serendipitous visit.”

The wine is dark claret, rich and sweet and thick on his tongue, stopping his mouth a moment longer before he can collect the breath to stutter, contrite. “I don’t know. Nothing. I wasn’t thinking. I just – I was walking, and I came here.”

Hannibal takes the goblet back again with a slow stroke of the pad of his thumb over the ridge of his knuckles. He raises it to his mouth and stares Will down pointedly. “Do not prevaricate with me, please, Will. I would prefer your honesty.”

“I–” Will drops his hand to his side and swallows. “There was a little forethought.”

A satisfied slant creases the corners of Hannibal’s eyes. “And what were you thinking about, when you decided to come to me?”

Will’s eyes dart from the curve of his fingers against the goblet to the interlocking wrought bronze points of his crown. Then down to the smooth, placid stone of his face, and then even lower.

“I thought about hunger,” he rasps, “Mine and yours and how I could sate it. How well you fill me.” He wets his lips and slowly, not faltering as much as pausing to exhibit the full intent of the motion, sinks to his knees.

Over the rim of the glass, Hannibal’s eyes go hot and dark as pitch.

He reaches out one hand to place it on the crown of Will’s head, cards through his hair and tips his chin back so that their gazes meet. The other raises the goblet to his lips for one more sip and then sets it aside. “Have I let you go hungry, Will?” he breathes.

“*Starving*,” Will tells him, with all the desperate want uncovered and shining in his face. Flushes at the flagrant display, at the boldness of throwing himself at Hannibal’s feet like he’s being paid for the pleasure, but does not turn away.

“Then I must answer for it,” he rumbles, low in his throat, chucking Will’s chin between his finger and thumb with a pleased tilt of his head. “And give you your remedy.”

Lord Hannibal lowers himself into one of the cushioned chairs, sinking into an elegant sprawl with his thighs spread wide, beckoning Will between them with a crooked finger. Will goes where he's bid, the same place he gave his oaths of service, hands raised and head bowed, knees on the hard floor. He

wets his lips and sets to plucking at the laces of Hannibal's trousers, pressing the heel of his palm against the swell of his rising cock through the cloth.

The length of him is hot and heavy, hardening eagerly with the first tease of a touch, straining at the laces until Will manages to draw him free and wrap his fingers around the base, watch the foreskin roll back from the flushed head, ply it back and forth with a gentle squeeze. Will might be inexperienced in the kind of liaisons he's had with Hannibal up to now, but he's an old hand at cocksucking. He leans forward and relishes the quiet sigh that falls from Hannibal's lips when he takes him into his mouth.

There is something gratifying in the pleasure of taking up this task, of narrowing his awareness to only the musky, clean smell of Hannibal in his nose and the weight of him on his tongue, the tense of his jaw and clutch of his lips around Hannibal, Hannibal, *Hannibal–*

"I'm glad you came to me," Lecter murmurs in his soft, soothing timbre, reaching down and petting the hair back from his temple. "My door is always open to you, dear boy, day or night. I would not turn you away." He shivers and his hips hitch up to press himself into the hot suck of Will's eager throat, nudge against his palate.

Will hollows his cheeks and takes him so deep he can't breathe in, eyes fluttering shut, muscles clenching and spasming. He draws back with a shocky gasp that leaves both the flushed length of Hannibal's cock and his mouth glistening with spit, so wet it nearly spills over. Hannibal's fingers go tight in his hair, but he makes no sound apart from a quiet, strained breath. When Will glances up through his lashes he can see the harsh clench of his jaw, the color high in his face, and the swirling hollow darkness of his eyes, black as tar, as the roiling ocean, as blood in moonlight.

A brash flicker of a grin pulls at his mouth. "You're as hungry as I am."

Hannibal exhales through his teeth. "I believe I could glut myself on the sight of you."

"Don't have to stand on ceremony, my Lord," he murmurs, inviting, and hovers his mouth suggestively near the bobbing head of the prick in his hand, strokes until his lips nearly press against the skin. "I'm at your service. If you see something you want, I suggest you take it."

The emotion that flashes through Hannibal's face flits by too fast to gauge anything more than knife-edge danger and a low growl before the hand in his hair tightens further, twisting painfully at his scalp and dragging, pulling him where Lecter wants him in a harsh, wet shove. Will grins as his throat constricts, keeps watching Hannibal as he goes limp and pliant, braces his hands against Hannibal's thighs and surrenders to the rough, rocking thrusts. Hannibal's rhythm does not allow for a great deal of mercy. Will huffs a quick gasp for air when he can and goes lightheaded with the lack of opportunity in short order. He gives back a few messy sucks and swallows between choking pants, bitter slickness on the back of his tongue, spit trailing down to his chin and tears swimming in the corners of his eyes.

"*Will*," Hannibal groans, voice rough and thready but velvet-warm. "Perfect, tempting thing." His palms flatten out to stroke over Will's hollowed cheeks. "You cannot make me an offer like that. I would keep you at my side always. Have you on your knees for me whenever I will it, just like this."

An image blossoms in florid detail in Will's imagination, of Hannibal bending him over the council table in front of a startled audience of mesne lords and advisers, pushing papers and charts to the floor to send him sprawling over the surface on hands and knees, fucking him quick and rough until the joins creak and splinter and crack under the force. He shuts his eyes, dizzy with the thought, and feels an eager throb of want low in his belly, cock twitching in his smallclothes. His hips tilt forward on

impulse and find nothing to press against, leaving him rocking helplessly while his throat flutters. He moans harshly around Hannibal's length, nails scraping his thighs.

Hannibal pulls him off with an indulgent smile and a slick, wet sound, watches him tremble and heave as he works his cock with one idle hand. “I do admire your obeisance, Will, but you may strive for a little more selfishness if you like.” He shifts one leg to slide between Will’s own, nudges at the aching stiffness of his hard-on with his foot. Will’s eyes go half-lidded again at the friction and he ruts forward a little helplessly.

The leather boot barely gives when he rubs against it, firm and deliciously unyielding, enough pressure to chafe even as it brings relief. The offer is a degrading and half-excruciating one, and it makes his blood burn. To be his dog, kneeling obedient at his feet. His *wolf*. Even Hannibal’s kindness has such a slant of cruelty, his attention is a poison, his regard is as sharp as a knife in the heart. Will wants it all. He wants it *so* much.

“Nothing selfless about this,” he promises, and the broken rasp of his voice is startling in his ears. “Fuck my mouth again.”

He parts his lips, lets Hannibal slide his cockhead over his tongue, laps at it gratefully and grinds down hard against the curve of the vamp. The coiled spring of lust in his gut winds tighter. Will is a creature of need, all base carnality, swallowing around shivering moans and rocking his hips in wild, wanton abandon.

Hannibal sinks into his throat, hot and wet and clutching, and bows over him, breath harsh and quick, eyes burning. His palm slides around to feel the bobbing of Will’s throat from the outside, fingers curling loosely around his neck in a ghost of a stranglehold. Will realizes after a moment that the motion is not threatening but curious, exploratory, mapping the way his gullet constricts as Hannibal forces his cock inside, deep and bruising. The last of the air in his lungs slips out in a frayed groan, leaves his head spinning and his heart racing at a frantic gallop, vision spotting with black.

With his focus so diverted, Will hardly registers that he’s drawing close until the tight-wound spring in his belly uncoils all at once. Short, shocky pulses of pleasure spark behind his eyes, spill down his spine in a whitewater flood. He finds the breath somehow to heave out a watery gasp as his hips stutter and he comes in his underclothes, still rutting against the arch of Hannibal’s boot. He hears a sharp inhale, feels the grip around his neck tighten. Hannibal pulls back far enough that when he spills, he does it onto Will’s waiting tongue. The taste of his spend is sharp and strong and he can only manage half a swallow, still fighting to catch his breath. The rest runs in messy rivulets down his chin, slick on his bruised lips, caught in his stubble. Will’s whole face painted in the evidence of his lord’s enjoyment. As proprietary as a brand.

Hannibal takes a moment, too, to compose himself, staring down at Will with his pupils blown wide and black and something cracked open in his expression, sharp as shattered glass. He heaves a ragged breath, chest rising and falling visibly with the effort, and his thumb swipes out to clean some of the dripping mess from the swell of his lower lip. “Untidy, Will,” he murmurs, faintly chiding.

“You prefer me in disarray,” he contends, words scraping out in a hitching rasp that aches like he’s been half throttled. “So long as you’re the one to cause it.”

A warm, slightly lopsided smile curves over his face as Hannibal lifts the pad of the digit to his mouth, inhales again and licks it clean. “Perhaps I do.”

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Music swells through the high arches of the great hall like a rolling thunderstorm, matched in pitch and fervor by the laughter and lively chatter of the dancers moving in an elegant swirl of light and color. The air is rent with the sound of merrymaking, of strings and drums and flutes and the distant, warbling tenor of one of the hired troupe of musicians. Such an incandescent storm of noise that Will, reaching for the quiet lull of his stream, cannot grasp at anything more than the low stirrings of an oncoming headache.

He stands stiffly in the lee of a column and tries not to look sullen enough to disrupt anybody's carousing. Namely, that's exactly what he's meant to be doing, along with the rest of the guards stationed around the borders of the feasting party, but at a glance he can tell that more of his peers than not have laxed a little in their duties to embrace the spirit of the event. Jimmy, he can see from this angle, is dancing a clumsy, gleeful round with Brian behind the banqueting tables, both too soused on the free-flowing wine to be doing any sort of guarding for the rest of the evening. Lady Alana is conversing amiably with a few of the visiting courtiers, resplendent in a satiny gown with embroidered golden flowers. And at the center of it all, he can see Lord Hannibal, playing the gracious host–

Will reaches out to pluck a cup of wine from a tray as it passes, tosses it back in a swallow that he barely tastes. It burns in his chest, bright and acidic.

Hannibal moves with leonine grace in the midst of the throng of dancers, all the planes and facets of his face catching the light like a marble statue, proud and noble, a captivating white grin on his face as he leads Lady Bedelia in an elegant turn. The pair of them are a perfectly matched vision of aristocratic charm. Her hair is tied up in ropes of spun gold, baring her lovely throat and the bright jewels that circle it. Her smile has a subtlety to it that is turned only on him, and his regard is pinned entirely on her in turn. They might be the only people in the room from the way that they have been dancing all night. A perfect matched set.

If they keep at it for another dance, Will might be truly on his way to getting as soused as Jimmy and Brian, and not nearly as carefree for it. He sighs and runs a palm over the stubble on his jaw, lingering a moment longer over the hot soreness of his well-used throat and then scoffing at his own woolgathering.

"It's a miserable lot we share, isn't it," someone chimes, just over his shoulder, in a lilting drawl. Will glances up into the bearded, bright-eyed face of one of Lady Bedelia's company. Well-appointed, but in the way that points to good patronage rather than a deep purse. The top buckle of his doublet is undone to bare a glimpse of the sparse hair on his chest and his grin is sharp and pointed. He has a narrow, sly face like a fox. When Will only stares blankly in response to his remark, he leans closer, and clarifies, with a conspiratorial bent, "Pining after them from afar."

This time, Will's scoff is not directed at himself. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The commoner in courtier's clothing laughs. "Ah, no, I know that look. I know it like I know my own reflection and I'm very fond of the sight of my own face. It's gotten me where I am today." He raises his own glass, throws a bawdy wink towards Will and says, "Anthony Dimmond."

"Will," he returns, after a beat in which he considers the likelihood of being able to shake the stranger off and finds his chances slim. "Graham."

"There," Dimmond says, "That's more like it. The promising journey of a friendship begun in a single easy step." He raises a toast and leans against the column. "So. Have you been a kept man very long, Will Graham?"

Will grits his teeth and doesn't bother denying him a second time. “Have you?”

Dimmond laughs like the chime of a bell. “Oh, ages now. I’m a bard by trade and therefore a paramour by livelihood. Poetry and ballad-crafting doesn’t keep a belly full on its own merits, and I hate to rush a good composition for anything as pedestrian as the means of my petty little survival, you understand.” He sips genially at his drink, feet shifting to the music. “A good ode can take years to pen, especially the way I go at it, which is to put the work off as long as possible and hope it writes itself. But you, you’re an industrious sort, I can see that much. No stranger to hard labor. You’re in it for sheer *passion* of the thing, aren’t you? The thrill of a torrid affair. That many-splendored enterprise that drives men to foolishness.”

“And yet it’s *our* miserable lot you mentioned,” Will huffs, pointedly. “And not only mine.”

“Yes, well.” Dimmond sighs, tosses his dark hair back from his forehead. “In certain unfortunate cases, one might be stricken down by a burgeoning fondness for one’s vocation that can grow to feel very much like the feeble stirrings of love. Comes with a dull ache.”

“Love,” Will bristles, darkly, “Is not the word I would use.”

“No, not a romantic bone in your body, I can see that,” he ribs, brow dancing in amusement. “But Will, the little charade plays on anyhow. We are *entangled*, aren’t we? Watching them at a distance–” He nods to the dancing throng, to the lord and lady turning gracefully with palms pressed together above their heads. “–despairing that we can only ever have their attention in fleeting, hushed moments. Knowing that one day we will be forgotten entirely, abandoned for the next shiny plaything, and they will return to their picturesque lives in their high towers. Perhaps they might even find each other, and make lots of beautiful, blue-blooded babies. Everything as it should be with the world, and you and I out of a job.”

The flute trills long and high to signal the end of the ronde, and the laughter and chatter briefly supersede the fading strains of the last song before the next begins all over again. Will feels his jaw working hard around a frown pulled from deep, deep behind the pit of his ribs, a very old and very cold vein of sorrow. He flushes with a pang of resentment that the small, old, long-healed wound can still ache as badly as the scars that came after. The ache of abandonment has a long half-life.

“Hardly seems worth the trouble,” he manages, darkly, “Getting *entangled* in the first place.”

Dimmond’s sly grin has a downward pull at the corners. His eyes glint. “Ah, but it’s excellent food for poetry,” he cheers. “That’s why I keep at it.”

Will smiles tightly and doesn’t know what to make of that.

There’s a sullen beat of quiet before he clears his throat, changes the subject with a brush-off and a shifting on his feet, leaning closer. “Talking of food,” Dimmond says, conspiratorial tone gone even softer, more breath than sound. “What do you suppose are the chances we’ve all been feasted on flesh of our fellow man here tonight? It’s a tantalizing prospect, the eating and the not knowing. Shockingly wicked. Or could one even really tell the difference?”

Taking a slow breath in through his nose, Will says, stonefaced, “If you know what to look for.”

“Fascinating,” Dimmond croons. “I suppose we all must make vultures of ourselves when we flock here by choice. In the spirit of hospitality.” He ducks his head back toward the dancers. “Milady will have none of it, of course, she subsists only on oysters and acorns all throughout every visit. But I confess I’m almost *intrigued*, myself.”

Will glances sidelong at him and takes a long pull from his wine. “Intrigued by Lord Hannibal,” he echoes, dryly. “Are you thinking about writing about him?”

“Much has been said already,” Dimmond answers with another coy wink. “Much more ink to be spilled in that old crusade, but not by me. Truly I think I’d rather walk a mile in *your* boots, when it comes to his Lordship.” His fox grin goes sharp-toothed at the corners and his gaze meanders back to the dancers with a lazy flare of heat. “Such a long and lean fellow. Those comely thighs. He could show a man a valuable trick or two about swordplay, don’t you think?” Dimmond’s eyes flicker back to Will and go dark with amusement. “Well, I suppose you’d know firsthand.”

The rest of the wine sears its way down Will’s throat in a hot, dry flood. His hackles raise and he looks away so as not to inflict Anthony Dimmond with a glare sharp enough to cut himself on.

“Still, must be careful with an appetite like that,” he muses, still caught up in his vulpine grinning. “You know he ate his own baby sister? All the rest of the family dead and gone but for the one in his charge that by all accounts he loved like a daughter, and pop!” He snaps his fingers, and Will’s jaw clenches. “Snapped up like a spring lamb. Devouring one’s littermates is one way to come out ahead of the pack, I suppose.”

The rumor and the drink mix badly in the pit of Will’s stomach and he sits his empty cup down on the corner of a banquet table with a little more sharp a rap than he means to. “Excuse me,” he rasps, brow drawn into a deep furrow. “Need some air. Wine’s getting to my head.”

Dimmond turns the slant of his smile back on Will and hums a breathy whisper of a laugh, low in his throat. As amused by the badly hidden dismissal as everything else. “Overindulged, have you?” he says glibly and winks. “Well. Charmed to make your acquaintance, anyway. I’ll be seeing you around, Will Graham.”

Will scoffs at him and slinks away, a little unsteady on his feet. When he glances back over his shoulder he can see that sharp, calculating gaze slide back to the twinned figures of the Lord and Lady, bright with interest, some keen ember of a thought burning low in the shadows there.

Chapter End Notes

Left to themselves Will and Alana would play out their ambiguous chivalric situationship 'meeting on the turret stairs' star-crossed romance forever with no resolution and that is beautiful but isn't it More beautiful that Hannibal is there to mess that up for them? And isn't jealous Will who thinks he is not jealous simply the best? Your honor they're so toxic and I love that for them

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

content warnings: more canon-typical violence and injury and death (oh my)

honestly I planned out the history and background of these characters as like. maybe the first thing when I started outlining this fic and then thought there wasn't going to be a place to bring any of it up so I have been VERY gratified to find a nice space for a Backstory Arc that fits in nicely with...some other events...hee hee

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Toward the end of the first fortnight since gaining a daughter Will wakes in the semi-dawn to the cold prickle of a knife at his neck.

He stares up at Abigail Hobbs, thirteen and bantam and freckle-faced, a red rimmed cast to her wide eyes and a ring of yellowed bruising on her throat. She's crouched over him with a kind of desperate, fierce defiance carved into every line of her body, her mouth drawn in a thin, serious pinch and her small fingers white-knuckled on the handle of the blade. When she sees Will rouse she tilts her chin up and sets her jaw.

Hardy, one of the hounds who followed him from Port Haven, reaches out to nudge the palm of his hand with a cold nose and huffs, curious, at the odd sight of the young new arrival holding his master at knifepoint. Will pats him away with a soft flick of his knuckles and a click of his tongue, and he turns away, settles on the floor again with his head tucked over his paws.

He waits for Abigail's direction. After a long moment he gets it. "You killed him," she whispers.

She hasn't spoken much before now, only taken everything in with her wide, glassy eyes and nodded or shook her head at the appropriate intervals. Even when she first woke, Will and Alana sitting anxiously by her beside, in a strange room in a strange castle and all alone in the world.

Is there anyone we could send for? A family friend or a cousin or an aunt or–

No.

Do you remember what happened?

Yes.

You can stay here as long as you want, I'll find you a position at court, Abigail, I'll see you taken care of. Would you like that?

No. No. No.

This is Will. Do you remember him?

Yes.

You could stay with me, Abigail. If you want. We could leave together. Make a new start.

A long, searching look, full of careful calculation. Then a slow, deliberate nod. Yes.

"You *killed* my father," Abigail says again and her lip trembles with suppressed sorrow. "Why?"

Will thinks back on all her wide-eyed, silent studying and finally realizes that she has been building up the courage to make this confrontation for weeks now. Waiting for the right time.

"He was going to kill you," he says, careful not to let his throat bob against the edge of the blade.

"He loved me," Abigail hisses, eyes narrowed.

"Yes," Will agrees. "Yes. He loved you so much he wanted never to be parted from you. To keep you tucked safely away inside himself where nothing could ever cause you harm. I looked at him and I could see it right away, how special you were to him, Abigail. Did he give you that knife?"

The wet sheen of gathering tears paint the buds of her cheeks. "He made it," she says proudly, voice quavering. "He's a hunter. He taught me how to butcher a deer." She presses the edge closer under his chin so Will has to breathe in shallowly through his nose to keep from drawing blood. "Did it feel good, when you killed him?"

Will has dreamed every night of the way Hobbs' body shuddered and shook and crumpled as the bolts pierced through him. One in the center of the back, puncturing the lung, and another in the shoulder when he turned, and yet another between the ribs, close to the heart, filling his mouth with blood as his dying eyes looked to Will with a helpless, wretched *understanding*. The first might have been a necessity, but the second and the third, those were an indulgence.

He doesn't regret killing Hobbs. But it's harder to reckon with the greedy, shameful impulse to take his place.

"Would it feel good to kill me?" he asks by way of answer. The knife stings and bites when he speaks. Blood trickles into the stubble under his chin, one stray drop welled up from a thin red line.

Abigail swallows again and flinches away. She darts back to the far end of the straw-tick mattress, so small and light that the movement looks like the fluttering of a bird. A little crow fed on carrion, too young to be out of the nest.

Will reaches up to feel the nick at his throat and smiles in a way he hopes is reassuring. She scrubs the tears from her face with one woolen sleeve and wraps an arm around herself. "Maybe," she says, with a calculated vulnerability. Only a little tremble to the words. "But I don't want to be alone."

"I'm as alone as you are," Will admits, sitting up, mirroring the same half-guarded stance. Their eyes meet and wordless understanding passes between them. Automatic and without conscious control, only purity of feeling, like forgiveness. "You have me, Abigail. We have each other. That counts for something."

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He finds the dark-eyed guard from Bedelia's retinue just where he fancifully imagined he might – in the mews with the other birds. She's alone up there, half in and half out of her tooled leather armor, one of the merlins perched on her gloved hand. It's a passager, only halfway trained and shifting warily in its jesses, but bearing the strange new encumbrance with promising grace.

Will stands by the door and watches. She's in no hurry to turn and acknowledge him, though she must sense his presence. He has the impression, from the lulling, meditative quality of her silence, that she is accustomed to spending a lot of time not talking to anyone at all. He ought to sympathize with that, as another solitary sort of person, but with all the spirits and the shadows he carries along inside his own head there's rarely a moment truly left to himself no matter how alone he might be otherwise.

"Lord Hannibal said you would want to speak to me," Chiyoh says tactfully, as the merlin shrieks and flits away to a more solid perch. Her voice is soft, sparse and lilting like a birdcall. "What do you want to know?"

A small, tight smile cuts across Will's face. "About Hannibal? Everything."

Her face goes wry, softly incredulous. "Why do you imagine I could tell you that?"

"You grew up with him," he tells her decisively, striding forward to seat himself on another of the benches, pitched forward with his elbows resting on his knees. "You knew the lion when it was still a cub. I'd bet there aren't many others who share that privilege."

Chiyoh looks at him with a blank shrewdness before her dark eyes take on a wistful cast. She reaches up to slide the heavy gauntlet from her hand and rest it in her lap and sighs. "My mother was his aunt," she admits. "The Lady Murasaki."

"Your father was not his uncle," Will murmurs for clarification. She shakes her head tightly.

"I could not be her child publicly, so I lived as her ward. Her attendant, when I was old enough. We spent many summers at the old Lecter Manor. It was a beautiful place, teeming with light and memory, and I was always sad to leave it again. I was frequently happy there, more than anywhere else. I had good company. Running through the gardens, chasing fireflies, making up children's games to play with–" she falters, fingers clutching at the leather glove, and stops. "Well. There are only ruins left now."

She shifts as if making to stand, to flit away. Will, tensed on the balls of his feet, swallows and says, stilted: "My mother was a Lady, too."

He hasn't voiced the admission in years. The words feel stark in his mouth, pared to reveal the raw core of an old wound. Chiyoh stills again, hearing the harsh cadence in his divulgence. The falcons and the hawks trill softly from their perches.

"She, uh, passed me off as her husband's child until I was almost five. It was easy enough, I took after her so strongly, and nobody really suspected her of any indiscretion, or me of being a natural son. But. After a while I guess she changed her mind. Pretended I had taken some sudden illness and died in the night and left me with my father. A fisherman in the lower town. He raised me." He wets his lips, and then grits his teeth in a tight, rictus grin. "I don't remember her face now. I only ever saw her again from a distance, glimpses of her high on some distant balcony or through a crowd in the midst of a procession. Daddy had this idea in his head that she might come back for me again some day, if not to raise me up at her right hand then to give me some position in the household, but that, uh, never happened. She only changed her mind again once I got older, decided it was too inconvenient that I was still out there muddying up her line of succession and started hiring bounty hunters to put right her mistakes. Chased the both of us out of the city and then halfway up the coast. That was how I lived, growing up: with a price on my head. Moving all the time, never really settling down. And then it was easier to keep running, even after it stopped mattering."

Chiyoh pierces him through with her black eyes, listening intently, her mouth pinched in a sharp, narrow line. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Thought you’d prefer to speak on equal terms,” Will says with a flat humor, “Bastard to bastard. And you can tell Hannibal, when he asks. *Quid pro quo*.”

She pushes to her feet and paces a little along the length of the rows of wire cages. Stops once she has a little more distance, a little more ease. “Alright.”

“Tell me about your other cousin,” he asks. “Please.”

“You ask a great deal, Will Graham,” she warns in a harsh warble.

“I do.” He shuts his eyes, waits in the breathing stillness of the dark behind his lids for her words to paint the first strokes of color.

Chiyoh exhales in a quiet huff. “We were of an age,” she says, “While Hannibal was nearly ten years older. Taught us how to play the dulcimer, how to fight with a sword. Raised snails in the gardens to draw in the fireflies by the hundreds, because they were her favorite. He was entirely devoted to her. Her name was Mischa.”

Will sees her in the quiet dark of his mind, a wisp of a girl, a spot of light as bright as a star fallen down to earth, small enough to cradle in his hands. Bright eyes, laughter like a bell. And he knows intimately the feeling that sinks heavy and viscid in his chest when the light flickers and the dark swallows it up. It sits dense and cloying in his lungs, squeezes at his heart with claws of ice. Love and grief intermingled.

He feels a tear hot on his cheek before he opens his eyes again, wipes it away with a careful smudge of his thumb. “How did she die?”

“That is not the kind of thing he would speak of outright,” Chiyoh chides. “He did not speak at all, not for several years, when he found us again after the castle fell. I only watched Hannibal grow his claws and cut his teeth. He tracked down the men responsible, killed them, and ate them. But I do not think they were the first he had ever eaten.”

“A father’s love,” Abigail says, behind him, staring up at the flutter of wings overhead, throat open like a red mouth. “Ever-fixed, all-consuming.”

“Thank you,” Will tells her, looking away from the eidolon for a moment. “For telling me.”

Chiyoh’s face sharpens again as she retrieves her cloak and buckles it on. “Thank me with your discretion, and do not make me regret it,” she says brusquely. “The past is a knife. It can cut deep if you wield it well. But it can cut both ways.”

She brushes past Will and out the door in a swirl of dark-dyed wool. He smiles tightly, looking back to the phantom of his daughter while she traces the wires of the birdcages and drips a steady trickle of blood over the packed earth floor. “I didn’t know that,” she says carefully. “About your mother. Funny thing to have in common, right?” Abigail turns. “Parents who tried their hand at filicide. Where did all their love go?”

Will scrubs a hand over his face and sits with his back against the bars. It was always easy having things in common with Abigail, even a little of the same darkness, a little ruthlessness, a little penchant for manipulation. It’s a heavy, sick feeling to find something familiar reflected back at him

from the hidden depths of Lord Lecter, all warped and wicked, let alone something so abjectly *human* as care and devotion and the pain of loss. “If Hannibal did kill Mischa,” he muses out loud. “It wasn’t for lack of love.” He finds the sea-glass shine of Abigail’s eyes, serious, and explains, tactfully, “He honored every part of her.”

She reaches out for one of the yearling falcons, who all ignore her touch, intangible as air, only a lingering impression of vital memory. “Isn’t that what you would have done with me? If you had the chance?”

“It’s what your father would have done,” Will corrects evasively.

“It’s what Hannibal would have done, too.” Abigail crosses her arms over her chest and her smile is soft and sad. “Which one are you more in danger of becoming, these days?”

He shuts his eyes and doesn’t give her an answer.

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Will throws himself back into his duties, still unsettled, the heavy and strange sick feeling staying with him every step of his patrol. Tossing and turning through the night, accomplishing nothing but to sweat through his shirts and stare into the dark and feel a sharp, lingering ache in his temples, like antlers are threatening to burst out through the skin in a swell of bone.

But he cannot do his work and give a wide berth to Hannibal forever. Soon enough, Will’s feet carry him back to the council chamber at midmorning, reluctant and heavy but still quick enough to reach the door some time before the rest of the advisors trickle in.

Alone with the books and maps and the dappled light from the clerestory, Lord Lecter looks up when he enters and shows a gratified sliver of a smile, a lightness to his movements as he stands. He beckons Will eagerly to his side and grasps him by the jaw to bestow a kiss on his mouth. Will does not mean to tense, but the free and open affection catches him unprepared.

Hannibal draws back, a slightly petulant cast to his chin. “You have been difficult to find.”

“Not deliberately,” Will excuses in a halfhearted murmur, not convincing either one of them of the lie very well. “I haven’t been feeling like myself, is all. And you’ve been entertaining company, my Lord, I would only have burdened you.”

“Didn’t I say my door was open?” He lifts the pitcher of wine from the table, casts around for his personal chalice to pour. “You know where I can be found, and I will gladly bear any burden you give me, Will. What has been occupying your thoughts, that you could not carry them to my lap?”

Will watches the wine spill in a gentle tumult of crimson that clings to the inside rim of the silver cup as it fills, the rich oaky smell sharp in the air. “Family,” he says. His voice is thready and distant in his own ears.

Hannibal hums thoughtfully. “Family shapes us. It provides a framework through which we may better learn to inhabit the world. Father, brother, son.”

The cup is offered up in the familiar ritual and Will takes it. “A broken frame is hard to build on.”

Hannibal’s eyes flicker bright with interest, the same as they always do. Unaltered by the new facets of Will he has been shown. There might be nothing Will could do that would ever change him. He’s

not sure where the desire to try arises from. A need for reciprocity. “Even the most stalwart foundations erode under the ravages of time and tempest. We who know what it is to see that ground give way and keep our footing, we have the advantage there.”

“Being battered against the shoals just makes us better swimmers?” He answers with heavy irony. The wine is acrid on his tongue.

“I would not presume to reduce either you or I to a set of influences,” Hannibal says, reaching up to clasp him by the neck with a smile. “I only meant that the both of us have lost a family, Will. It would be fitting if fate stood to see us gain another.”

Will sets the cup down on the table with a sharp thud instead of pressing it back into Hannibal’s hands, the sick weight in his stomach solidifying into a cold nausea. He steps back before the impulse to swing a fist at his Lordship’s face can get the better of him and feels his jaw pulse, near trembling with sudden, desperate anger.

“No,” he says in a rough whisper. “No, that wouldn’t be very fitting at all.”

Hannibal lets him go, face drawn into a subtle moue of surprise. He turns away to begin adjusting the paperwork closest at hand, clearly and badly wrong-footed. “Perhaps I misspoke. That was grandiose of me, Will, I apologize for… overstepping.”

Will still wants to punch him in the mouth, but the impulse cools at the sight of Hannibal – sanguine and untouchable – faltering. And then the knock sounds at the door and all his uncertainty falls away again, gathered back together behind the seamless plates of his marble armor, the last chinks sliding into place between the space of two breaths.

“Come in,” he says serenely, every inch the Lord Paramount. Will bows as the door swings open and retreats to his post without another word.

The council chamber fills with the regular team of advisors, sans Lounds, and then Lady Bedelia and her courtiers, intermingling across the whole length of the long table, and picking up conversations where they had left off at the last feast, or the dance before that, or the one preceding, as if no intervening time had passed at all.

Hannibal stands to speak and has them spellbound in an instant, leading an easy discourse of trade negotiation between estates, scot and lot and avera and inward. He has a way of leaning on Bedelia, Will notes, that makes her cede to him when small conflicts arise. Some favor he can hold over her head, remind her of the debt with nothing more than a look or a word that means nothing of any consequence to the rest of the chamber, but the tightness around her eyes speaks volumes.

Will’s ire fades, but the nausea remains. It mingles badly with the heavy malaise of unease that has been cast over him like a fog. He grits his jaw against the twisting of his guts and stares fixedly at the iron stag head mounted on the wall above the table. Lets the voices wash over him in a hazy wave.

A bead of sweat traces down his temple. Will brushes it away. His stomach aches and roils.

One of House Du Maurier’s courtiers throws gentle snubbing remarks across the table once or twice, little underhanded replies that suggest a lack of confidence in matters pertaining to the southern demesnes. Not overt enough to earn a reply, but met each time by an infinitesimal twitch of Hannibal’s mouth and a sidelong glance from Lady Bedelia. Will watches the exchange with a growing anticipation, knowing firsthand Hannibal’s particular way of making problems arise for the

people who cross him. Tragic accidents on the tournament fields or the hunting grounds. Tripping down a stone staircase in the night. Will could do it for him. Hannibal wants to see him hunt, after all.

Easier to think of playing the role of Hannibal's dog than his makeshift fucking *family*. The thought still makes his jaw clench. This framework, at least, is more familiar, the associations less bitter. The expectations are more clear.

His head feels heavy and his neck is stiff. Annoyed at the insistent ache of his churning stomach, Will tries to adjust his posture to ease a little of the tension. He swallows, and his queasiness grows suddenly to a lancing cramp of pain, harsh enough to make him wince and clench fists at his sides.

Will shuts his eyes against the dull throb of an oncoming headache, battling the rising nausea. When he opens them again he meets the eyes of Lady Bedelia's pet poet. He's a little apart from the rest of the council, lounging with one elbow propped on the lintel of the fireplace on the far side of the room. Hair swept back off his face in an artful wave and teeth small and white like pearls. Dimmond's bored expression slides into a guileless smirk of curious amusement at whatever he spots in the furrows of Will's face. He holds Will's stare a moment longer, then winks.

Will looks down and notices that his hands are shaking.

"Hannibal," he barks abruptly, deafening in the way his interruption brings the conversation grinding to a halt. For half a second he isn't sure why he spoke, and then he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt. Tastes the certainty on his tongue, bitter as gall and burning hot. The ache in his stomach is almost enough to bend him double. "My Lord, don't *touch* that–"

He lurches across the table, plants his palm over the mouth of the silver goblet and drags it out of Lecter's grasp. Only just checks the impulse to pitch it to the floor and spill the contents out in a red wash. He can't remember if he saw Hannibal drink after he set the cup down. He wasn't watching closely enough. Wasn't paying attention. He feels the breath rattle harshly in his chest and curses himself for his lapse. His guts churn, sharp and sick, and something pangs dangerously in his chest.

The council members are murmuring to one another uneasily. Hannibal's face is expressionless with a grim cast, eyes deep-set and dark. "What is it, Will?"

Will snatches a penknife up from where it rests beside a freshly-cut quill, then turns on his heel and knocks Dimmond into the wall. He pushes the blade menacingly against the flat of his cheek, hoping to wipe that cocksure grin off his face, but the motion only draws attention to the ugly tremor of his fingers. "Was it your bright idea to poison his Lordship," he growls, "Or did you just like the look of a coin crossing your palm?"

"Don't like the look of you much at the moment," Dimmond says with a nervous giggle. "Very off-color. Please don't take it personally, my friend, I had no idea you shared Lecter's cups as well as his bed." The penknife bites into his cheek, wells up with a thin line of dripping red. "Really ought to maintain better boundaries in a relationship, it would have saved the both of us a lot of trouble. You most of all."

Hannibal didn't drink it. Will exhales in relief and the next stubborn drag in burns his lungs, makes his vision spot with black like the air itself is choking him, too hot and too thick.

A strong hand rests at the ball of his shoulder and he hears Hannibal's voice, clipped and soft. "The name of the toxicant, please, and the dosage."

Dimmond's attention flickers from Will's pallid face to a point over his shoulder. "How should I know?" he bluffs briskly. "Hemlock, henbane, hellebore, something of that nature. I never cared to learn the distinction. I'm not much of a scholar for flower language myself, find it all desperately overwrought as metaphors go. Enough to spoil the meat, I should think, if that's your concern."

Hannibal reaches up, wraps one hand around Will's shaking one and gestures for him to release the ornate little blade. Will flexes his knuckles and drops it into his palm, looses his hold on Dimmond's shirt. Stumbles sideways to pitch his shoulder against the mantlepiece so that the wall can hold him up, unsteady on his feet.

The poet reaches up to adjust the rumpled collar of his jacket and clears his throat, still half-grinning. "But then, I could make an effort to remember a little more clearly, if-*f-f-f–*"

The penknife makes only a soft little thresh of sound when it drives into the side of his head, though the untempered poniard must come close to buckling under the force. Dimmond stares at it in his periphery with wide, white eyes. Hannibal looks at his fist still clutching the chiseled silver handle like it moved without his accord and sighs.

He pulls it free again and Dimmond crumples to the ground, still and silent.

Hannibal takes out a linen cloth to wipe blood and brain matter from the blade and casts an apologetic glance over his shoulder toward the table of stricken advisors. "That may have been impulsive," he says with a chilly but passable pastiche of regret.

Will has enough breath for a dry, bewildered laugh, though his mouth has gone numb. Then the laugh sticks in his chest, burning hot, turns to a soundless, agonized convulsion that sends him crumpling to his hands and knees, gasping and choking. He retches and tastes bitter poison and the sharp coldness of his own fear, but once the retching starts there's no stopping it until his vision is dark at the edges from lack of air. Sour wine makes his guts spasm and ache worse than the bite of the sword piercing him through. Will pants and hears a distant clamor of voices fading in and out of focus, panicked shouting, cursing, and he thinks he can just make out Lady Bedelia's frosty tones imperiously denying *if you think I had anything to do with this–*

Hannibal's voice isn't among them. Hannibal's back is turned, his antlered crown stretching up toward the ceiling, leaving Will behind again. He curls up on the ground in the spreading pool of blood, clutching at his burning stomach and reaching out toward the lifeless hand reaching back for him.

The swirling dark in the corners of his vision encroaches, and his chest throbs with the same dull ache again. Will grunts, and this time as he shuts his eyes the stream floods its banks and rises up to wash him away with the current.

Chapter End Notes

hi my name is Meg and I just fucking LOVE it when bad things happen to characters that I like!! this is not an apology and it will happen again

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> YES OKAY SO. I pushed back posting a little because I have been deep in flow finishing up a later section and I CANNOT for the life of me go back and write immediately after updating, hindbrain is far too preoccupied with feedback. BUT I have to post it now because I sprained my ankle trying to acquire a cool free table earlier today and to be honest I just want a win after that. ouch! ow!
>
> content warnings: plenty of description of physical illness but nothing too graphic in an emetophobia kind of way. some graphic violence and threats of it! some cannibalism! also sexual content! consecutive but not entirely concurrent to the former

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I've been here before, Will thinks through the red haze.

It's more void than place. Somewhere in-between where nothing exists but the white-hot spark at the heart of the flame and a sensation of weightlessness. Of floating. Half submerged in a lake of molten lead with all his blood boiling under the pressure, hissing and bubbling away into vapor. Soon enough he'll be emptied out and then burst like a clay pot in the sucking heat.

There's no spar of land to cling to as he's borne along on the tide and nothing he can do to make his hollow, splintering limbs tread water, but neither does he sink. He floats on, and on, and on, maybe set to float forever. Will tries fitfully to submerge his face, thrashing and sick to death of burning alive, but stays stubbornly buoyed up.

With no other options being afforded to him, he grits his teeth and screams.

There's not enough breath in his chest to give it sound, but he manages a whimper. No one reaches back to pull him to shore. Still he can sense that he isn't alone, can hear the low murmuring of hushed voices overhead.

Cold water drips across his face and he shudders. Flutters open his eyes to see a bleary, hazy outline of a woman's face, wooden and distant and nearly a stranger, bent close over him.

Lady Bedelia, he recognizes dimly. Somehow, he had expected…

"*H'nnibal*?"

Her head tilts in contemplation and her face stays impassive and reserved. Her attention is not on him, or not entirely. She looks away and Will's eyes slide shut again, leave him in the dark listening to the hollow echoes as he drifts, laboring for every threadbare breath. "You're angry with yourself," she says in a thoughtful tone. "Nearly as angry as you are with me."

"Not nearly." Will leans toward the sound of that voice, so cool and soft and achingly familiar. Twitches the numb fingers on the leaden weight of his closest arm trying to grasp it and realizes that

he can feel pressure, just a little, at the flat of his wrist. “Aconite has a pronounced bitterness. The scent is weak, but it carries a little of the same acridity.”

“Then you should have smelled it,” Lady Du Maurier hums. “I half expected that you would, you have a keen nose. Why didn't you?”

“My mind was elsewhere.” The pressure tightens and Will clings to the sensation as another wracking spasm shakes him. Holds tight. The little phantom of a touch is like a paddle. Not enough to keep him afloat, but enough to begin to steer, to focus through the haze of agonizing pain.

“Your control has always been meticulous,” she says, and sets a cool compress on his forehead with a clinical touch. The fire is deep under his skin, blistering in his lungs, and a little cold water will not douse it. “It’s uncharacteristic of you to allow yourself to become unfocused. You must be very fond of him.”

Hannibal is very silent for several shuddering heartbeats.

Du Maurier’s voice goes slanted with something like amusement. “You’re right to be frustrated. Your preoccupation with Will Graham should trouble you, if it has influenced you to betray yourself. Blinded you to danger.”

“To the danger of *your* betrayal,” Hannibal says, his tone as slick as ice. “You tried to kill me, Bedelia. And by such a banal and impersonal method as poisoning. I believed you capable of so much better.”

Will looses his grip a little on the thread of conversation, straining for oxygen with his weak, burning lungs, or perhaps there is only silence again, but when he feels the bones in his wrist grind and groan at the sudden harsh tightening of the foreign grip, he finds his paddle again.

“You ought to act soon, if you intend to administer the solution Doctor Gideon has left for us. His pulse is quite labored now.”

There’s a thoughtful hum from Lady Bedelia, the clink of a small glass ampoule. “How much?”

“Poisoning is in the end only a game of proportions,” Hannibal muses without apparent urgency. “Dependent on the context even a poison can become a cure. Belladonna is a potent toxin in its own right. A few drops would serve to quicken his heart and counteract the paralytic effect of the wolfsbane, while the contents of the whole bottle would be quite lethal.”

“The same end result, I assume, as if I chose to do nothing at all.”

“In some ways.” He can just feel the brush of Hannibal’s thumb stroking along the blade of his hand, feels pitifully like burrowing into the soft coolness of the sensation and dying there. “But with a large dose, it would be a merciful end. Fast, without lingering pain. Like slipping into a warm bath.”

“Mercy is a subjective concept.” Lady Bedelia sighs. “The last time you left a wounded bird at my door,” she says, “You were hoping I would crush it. What are you hoping for now?”

The flare of a quiet breath. “I have outlined my terms. The decision is in your hands.”

“Then I am forced to speculate on your motivations,” she says, voice tight with annoyance. “And guess which strain of mercy is really most merciful. If he lives, I trust your promise to spare my life in turn. I would prefer to survive our acquaintance, if I can. But you might find a way to make that option more distasteful than a quick execution. And,” she plucks the cool compress off of Will’s

flushed face, watches him grit his teeth and groan in agony. “If he does die, you would at least be spared the danger of further influence. It might be the safest option for you in the long run. I find myself compelled to protect you as I have always been, Hannibal, despite trying to have you assassinated this morning.”

“We have made a habit of relying on one another,” Hannibal says. Will can hear the subtle lightness of his thin smile. “Habits are not easily set aside. Your comfort and security have been often intertwined with my own over the course of our association. I have considered you a friend, Bedelia. I will be disappointed to lose your friendship, whatever the outcome.”

“Friendship with you,” Lady Bedelia replies with a furious quiver in her voice, “Is blackmail elevated to the level of love. A game with no win conditions. I am content to be free of it.”

The stopper on the bottle opens with a sharp pop and she grips Will’s jaw tight in her hand, tips his head back to force his mouth open. Will shudders, eyes rolling, tongue heavy and thick in his mouth. He’s putty in her hands, feverish and sweat-drenched and helpless as a newborn lamb. His breathing sounds ragged to his own ears, quick and rough and wheezing. He might easily choke on the belladonna before she can tip it all down his throat. If he had the breath to laugh at the little irony, he thinks he would.

Will leans back and waits to drown, but only a single drop trickles over his tongue, and then another. The taste is sweet, bright and acid like a ripe cherry.

He licks his tingling lips and swallows reflexively and she lets him fall back into the quiet haze, wretched and listless, burning cold with the trembling of his waning heart. “There,” she says numbly. “Keep him, and let us both live to regret it.” There’s a sharp clink of glass as Lady Bedelia sets the rest of the vial down and a susurrus of swishing skirts to mark her retreating footsteps, before the door closes behind her and she is gone.

With even that little exertion Will is spent, the swell of the tide dragging him back under, but he keeps his head above the surface just long enough to feel Hannibal slump and let out a quiet, terse breath of relief.

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Beneath the surface of the molten river, not quite waking or sleeping, Will walks in unquiet dreams.

He watches the ceiling bloom into bursts of purple wildflowers that drip blood and ink onto his face. The colors are bright and vivid and artificial, and every sound is magnified and sharp-edged like a song played on an out of tune harp. The boiling heat cools off, but the pain in his chest lingers. He hears a squealing laugh and looks down to see Mason Verger, crowned with the bristly, tusked face of a wild boar, carving into the flesh of his sternum with a dull knife and a clumsy hand. “There’s a good doggy,” he giggles, sing-song. “Did you miss me? We are gonna have some good, *funny* times together when you come home, little mutt, you and me.”

Will’s jaw tightens around a scream to bite off the sound before it can escape. Mason wipes the flat of the knife clean against his cheek and trades it off to the horned hunter, formed of spun shadow and stinking of rot. The antlered monster strokes his hair and caresses his face, then re-opens the wound in his gut with a quick flash of the blade and a proud smile. It leans down to press its gore-stained lips to Will’s in a foul, coppery kiss and places a severed ear on his tongue. Fingers grip his jaw to delicately close his teeth around it. The taste of soot and mud coats Will’s mouth until he gags on it, but the hunter’s claws hold him tight by the chin so that he can’t turn away. Pressure swells and the bone roots of antlers jutting up from his skull finally burst through the skin.

He shuts his eyes tight and feels his heart pound hard and fast in his ears, then the florid visions blend and blur and slide away into darkness and he opens his eyes again to a silent, empty room that he recognizes faintly as the interior of the infirmary.

He knows the fever is broken by the way his shirt is plastered to his back with sweat and his head is pounding but clear. His mouth is dry and full of the bitter tang of stale sickness and his body aches all over from the exhaustive effort of clawing itself out of the grave. Will catalogs his aches and pains and pushes himself gradually upright enough to prop his back against the bedframe, something close to seated. By the time he arrives there, trembling faintly with fatigue, the door creaks open.

Lord Hannibal stops in the entryway, backlit with the torchlight from the hall, cast in shadow, eyes glowing bright. His lips quirk up in a small, soft smile. Will takes in the glimmer of emotion he can manage to pluck from the smooth planes of his face and categorizes it dazedly as affection. Fondness. Or worse, something very near to open adoration. “Will,” he says warmly.

He sets down a pair of bowls on the table, steaming and heavy with the rich smell of meat and spices. Will’s stomach growls loud enough to make him flush in chagrin.

“Potage,” Hannibal lists presentationally, “Thickened with egg. Almonds, currants, nutmeg, rosemary, orange blossom water.” He glances away to pour a cup of water from a pitcher sitting at the bedside, then glances back with an unmistakable twinkle in his eye as he offers it up. “Venison shank, for additional heartiness and depth of flavor.”

Will’s eyebrow twitches up and he keeps both hands on the cup as he drinks to steady his grip. His throat is raw and stinging, but it's a step towards soothing the ache. And another comfort to think that somewhere Lady Bedelia is bundled into the back of a carriage, sour-faced and nursing at least half a missing limb. He hopes she likes her mercy. “You made me soup,” he rasps when he finds his voice.

Hannibal blinks and seats himself primly on the edge of the bed. “Yes.”

It wouldn’t be quite fitting to thank him, not for the dubious courtesy of playing games with his life. Will wouldn’t want to encourage him. But his mouth waters at the smell wafting from the bowl, the way the meat breaks apart under his spoon, rich and savory and hot. It fills his hollow stomach better than anything he’s ever tasted and he acknowledges that largesse in the spirit it was given. “This is delicious,” he admits.

Hannibal takes a careful spoonful from his own portion with a subtle, pleased flash of a smile.

They eat in companionable silence, Will propped against the pillows and hardly keeping his eyes open by the time his spoon scrapes the bottom of the bowl. Hannibal takes it from him to set aside and reaches out to rest a hand on his nape, thumb rasping against the overgrown stubble on his jaw, fingers carding through his hair. “Dear Will,” he says, low and soft. “It is good to see you well.”

“I’ve been better,” he says while slanting into the touch, eyes fluttering to half-mast. “How long did you sit here and watch me sleep?”

His smile flares to show the sharp edges of his teeth, pleased at the intuition. “A day and a night. Very little of it was a true sleep, I think. Your eyes were frequently open, gazing through me at visions beyond my sight. Uncertain of where you were.”

Will reaches out, grasps loosely at the soft linen hem of his shirt. “Don’t pretend that bothered you on my account,” he grunts.

“I found it fascinating,” Hannibal says, drawing him in until Will’s temple presses to the hollow of his shoulder. “You are beautiful in delirium, and in extremis. It gives you the look of an oracle, pyretic with divine knowledge. I wanted to hear you speak your revelations in tongues of fire. Whisper to me what you could see so clearly.” Will shivers and Hannibal holds him fast. “Still, I prefer you lucid. Under no power but your own force of will.”

“And under yours,” he murmurs, breath wafting across the bare skin at the hollow of Hannibal’s throat. “Was it not homage enough to drink poison for you, Lord Lecter? Here I thought you liked me on my knees. Shall I kneel and pledge my fealty again?”

Hannibal’s throat bobs subtly, but Will catches the motion from his vantage. He tilts his face up and kisses the corner of his mouth and then catches their lips together, pulling him close by the grip on his shirt. Hannibal groans softly into the kiss and traces his tongue over the ridges of his teeth. “You would overexert yourself,” he chides sternly, when he pulls away.

“I want to,” Will says in a sultry breath, “I want you.”

“Will,” he says firmly, maneuvering him back to a reclining posture. “No. You need your rest.”

He sees the reason of it, but the prickling warmth of incitement to lust is already rising under his skin, making him restless. He lies lax against the pillows, little energy in him, but his blood is up. “Hannibal,” he pleads stubbornly.

One hand still pressing against his ribs, holding him down, Hannibal bears his entreaty with a dark-eyed lour and a huff. “Stay where you are,” he says in a tone that brooks no argument, then shifts to tug Will’s braies down off his hips with a stern flicker of a look.

“Han–” Will starts and then cuts himself off with a throaty, shocked moan as Hannibal takes his hardening prick in hand, squeezes and fondles him as he fills. “You – oh. *Mmm*.”

“Is this what you wanted of me?” Hannibal murmurs thickly, stroking him slow and even, winding him up tighter with every touch. “Repayment for your loyalty? For services rendered?”

Will’s head spins and he goes dappled pink down from his cheeks to his stomach, the color rising easily in the wake of his fever-flush. He whines and throws a hand over his eyes.

“Will.” Hannibal catches his wrist, moves his arm down and away. His face is hungry, coveting. “Look at me.”

He takes Will in his mouth, still holding him down by the palm planted against his heaving stomach. The wet heat of him draws Will in, goes tight around him in a lascivious suck, and he feels it like a punch in the gut. “That, uh, that. Oh god.”

The slickness and the red flush of his lips reminds Will of the feel of Hannibal's tongue cleaving him open, fucking him mercilessly, and he sighs long and low and spreads his thighs against the blankets, back arching. His head is too heavy and hollow for words. He makes do with soft, wanton groans and grasps at the spun silver and straw of Hannibal’s hair. The want supercedes the limitations of his body, boneless and leaden with fatigue, but he wants anyway, hips rolling lazily as Hannibal savors him on his palate.

Will watches him because he was bid to, warm-faced and open-mouthed. He has the nebulous thought that Hannibal is beautiful. With his soft, strange quietude, lordly and regal, draped in velvets and furs, claws cleverly sheathed. And, too, in all his bloody-mawed wild horror, with unmatched caprice and

cruelty. Beautiful like the awe and terror of a thunderstorm on the sea. The graceful arc of a wave that overturns a ship and drags it down in a cold, deathly embrace.

And for all that power he's only a man. And Will is going to be the snake who finally strikes his heel.

He throws his head back with a broken cry, clutches tight and pants, garbles out a thin, reedy warning, but Hannibal only clutches him back, tugs him in closer and drinks him down until he's shuddering and twitching. The hand braced against Will's belly slides past the hem of his shirt and up to trace the bottom of his ribs, feel the tensing of his diaphragm as his lungs fill and empty. He hums around Will's length and his nostrils flare in amusement when oversensitivity makes Will squirm.

He relents and Will exhales gratefully. Then the flat of his palm drifts south again.

Will shuts his eyes as Hannibal pauses with his hand pressed against the knotted, twisting ribbon of white that bisects his belly from hip to lower rib. Sheer enervation alone, probably, stops his heart from racing as the man who gave him the scar rests his cheek against Will's thigh and studies it, tracing the shape with idle curiosity, as a scholar intrigued only because it is an unturned page in the book of records that make Will up and he intends to survey them all.

"You've told me of other marks you bear," he says, voice gone husky. "But not this one."

Will shivers, harsh and involuntary, and Hannibal's hand shifts to the side of his waist at a respectful remove. He's surprised to keep his composure well enough to find his voice, even speak a word that comes out without an audible tremor of anguish. It's hard to know when he became such an accomplished liar. "It's not a very good story."

Hannibal smiles, soft and indulgent. "Nevertheless. It interests me." He tucks the blankets back around Will, leans up and kisses him with an undeniable tenderness, rests their foreheads together as he skirts the bourn of sleep. "You must promise to tell it to me someday."

"Some day," Will echoes, drowsy but sensible enough to feel his teeth grit hard around the words, "Soon. You'll hear it."

Soft lips brush his forehead and he shuts his eyes and sinks down into the mire of sleep.

In his dreams he sinks the knife to the hilt into the soft meat of the horned hunter's belly and draws it across, opening him like a felled deer. A mirror image of himself. Pinned underneath his weight, the hunter smiles, broad and crimson-stained. Under the mask of soot and gore that distort its features into monstrous shadows, Will watches the proud planes of Hannibal's face blur and blend until they look so much more like his own. He raises the flat of the blade to his lips and runs his tongue over the steel. The blood in his mouth tastes like wine.

Chapter End Notes

good GOD the joy of inserting a Hannibal 'n Bedelia therapy session into a fic which is entirely from Will's limited POV and in a context where therapy sessions are not quite A Thing! and good GOD slightly surreal and unsettling hurt/comfort....the Lecter Specialty

listen definitely call poison control in lieu of taking any advice outlined here but it IS also true that atropine, the active ingredient in belladonna/nightshade, is used to treat bradycardia in

victims of aconite/wolfsbane/monkshood poisoning. I'm sure no medical professional would suggest straight belladonna bc it is so toxic and will give you GNARLY hallucinations, not that Will needs any medical intervention to have the weirdest and most upsetting dreams possible. but anyway who's taking medical advice from Dr. Malpractice? It's all in good storytelling fun

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

> haha omg hiiii sorry to be off schedule I got very caught up in the writing and not the posting portion of this fic for a few days! I'm also doing a lot of hosting over the next week and a bit so we may still be in the uncertain times vis a vis keeping to regular saturday nights. I have decided to make up for it by making every chapter absolutely fuck hard, you're welcome, and once again suggest that subscribing is a good way to not miss an update
>
> content warnings! important for this chapter because uh. I do hit square on the animal cruelty button. greater specificity about that in the end notes for potential spoilers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steel clashes and rings. The impact shudders through Will's arm like a roll of thunder until it reaches the ball of his shoulder. He winces sharply as the muscle spasms, tries to keep his grip from loosening but feels his fingers numb with the aftershocks. His sword drops and he curses as the blunted tip of the other smacks against his side.

"Again," he huffs.

Brian fixes him with a flat, leery look and steps back into his starting position with a sigh. "You know, they say the root of insanity is trying the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result."

"I didn't brace myself well enough," Will snaps. "Do it again. I'll get it this time."

"Feel like *my* arm is about to fall off," he grunts and adjusts his grip, raises the blunted blade. "And I'm not the one who was on bedrest three days ago."

He swings and Will parries, planting his feet and gritting his teeth, and the drill starts over again. "Can't rest forever," he points out. "Have to get back in the saddle eventually."

Zeller comes at him from a low angle and he sidesteps the thrust, knocks his shield into the flat of the blade to turn it. "You want to be a glutton for punishment," he huffs, "Go ahead. Be my guest."

Will manages another two, three blows before he raises his arm too high and the weight of the sword strains his shoulder into dropping again. He hisses through his teeth and groans in frustration, sweat beading down his temple.

Back in the saddle, he thinks, stubbornly. *Come on, Graham. Don't give up on me now*. A thought that comes, as always, in Jack's voice. Mason's the one who made a weapon out of him, but Jack kept him honed, dragged him out to the training yard as soon as his guts were knitted together well enough to keep him on his feet and didn't take no for an answer. Doggedness that kept him alive all over again, because it only took Lord Verger a fortnight longer to get bored of waiting around for the chance to test his new toy and throw him into the ring with one of his prize boars in rut and a broken javelin. Will gave him a feast and kept a souvenir in the shape of a tusk-furrow scar along the back of one calf. And then he did it again, and again, and again, proving his worth in spilled blood.

It's what he is good for, and that much is a lesson he's sweated and bled out a hundred times. Will is a knife and if he lounges around listlessly in bed one hour longer, he's letting himself go to rust.

"Again."

Brian curses him out under his breath, but he picks up his sword.

"What the hell is going on here?"

Will turns to face Bev with his chin up. "Training."

She crosses her arms and looks to Zeller, who shrugs and mouths something that Will doesn't turn to see. "Your stance is all wrong."

Narrowing his eyes, Will stabs his blunted blade into the turf and leans on the pommel. "I got my shoulder used as a chew toy," he points out flatly. "I'm working on it."

"So did I," Beverly says cheerily, and reaches out. Brian hands off his sword to her and she swings it one-handed before taking a firmer grip. "By my baby sister, to be fair, not a wild animal, but you would not believe the jaw strength on a ten-year-old with a grudge."

"What'd you do?" Will looks to her hands on the hilt, tries to adjust his own to match.

"Broke the leg off her wooden horse," she says, and shows him the starting position. "Still stood just fine with three, but she wasn't happy. Thought I was going to get some kind of infection. Little hellion. Tuck your elbow in."

It is an easier stance, takes a little of the strain off the joint and keeps him from having to raise his arm higher than he can manage it. She strikes out and he parries the blows, even gets in a hit of his own after a few rounds. It's not as effortless as he's used to, but it is an improvement.

"I'll show you some stretches," she says when they break for water. "Helps with your mobility, but you have to actually keep up with them, yeah?"

Will snorts. "Just what I wanted, more homework."

Beverly checks her hip into his and reaches back to reaffix her braid, fine hair slipped out of its pins. "Hey, nobody asked you to come out here and cajole Brian into beating you black and blue."

"He was going easy on me," Will promises, rolling his eyes.

"I wasn't," Zeller lies, mopping the sweat off his nape.

"Should've asked Jimmy," Bev hums as she hangs up the blunted swords. "He looks like a soft touch, but he's too competitive to hold back for long. Gets very *death before dishonor* about sword drills. Almost took my leg off at the knee with one of these last tim – oh!"

The gatehouse door swings open from the other side as she approaches it, nearly knocks into her face as Sir Ingram pushes through, cold eyes flitting over all three of them as he strides by. Whistling tunelessly. There's a notable lightness in his step that catches Will's attention and holds it.

He stops at the other wall of the armory, bends and retrieves a pair of chevre leather gloves from beside a rack of polearms and glances over his shoulder at the silent trio of guards with a flash of

empty smile. “Forget my own head if it wasn’t attached,” he announces blithely, then clips them to his belt and starts up the whistling again.

Will’s tongue slips before he can bite down on it and he speaks up with a too-callous edge. “You’re in a good mood.”

Ingram’s empty smile fixes on him more firmly. There’s a keen glint deep in his dead-fish eyes that turns Will’s stomach. “I had a little windfall, Master Graham,” he says with an enigmatic grin. “Recouped a few losses. Investments paying back with interest.”

“Lucky for you,” Will congratulates tonelessly.

He clasps his sallet under one arm and tilts his head. “And what about yourself? Last I heard you were at death’s door. Twice in a row, in fact. Back on your feet so soon?”

Beverly winces, but Will is already showing the knight a grim smile. “Oh yes. I’m, uh, hard to kill.”

Ingram stares him down another flash of a moment longer as his hollow smile goes even wider, white as bone. “Lucky for you.”

He nods and shoulders back through the door, leaving Will to stare after him with a hard, uncertain look, hackles raised. Zeller slouches in his seat with a tight sigh. “Jesus, Will.”

“I’m as civil with that prick as he is with me,” Will bites out thinly.

“Yeah, but Sir Ingram doesn’t want civility,” Bev says, “He wants deference, and he will get nasty if he thinks you don’t know your place. *Don’t* give him a reason to knock you down a peg.”

Will scrubs a hand over his face, shoulders drawn in tight. “I know my place,” he grimaces and wonders how the familiar assurance is starting to sound tinny and false in his ears. “I don’t like bullies.”

Brian nods, short and sharp, and Bev plants a hand on his forearm. “Lady Bloom can vouch for you, at least,” she reassures, “If he tries anything. She’s never liked Sir Ingram. Says he looks cold-blooded, like a snake.”

A slightly tense smile flits over Will’s face. “Alana has good intuition.”

“Oh, right,” Bev interrupts, struck by a sudden thought. “Almost forgot what I came here to ask you in the first place after you ran me around trying to pop your shoulder out of its socket. That dog of hers. The stray you found.”

“Cavall?” Will’s brow creases.

“You haven’t been holing her up anywhere, have you? Secreting her away under your sickbed? Or back at the barracks?”

His stomach sinks. “She’s missing,” he interprets dully.

“Ran away,” Bev confirms with a short nod. “That’s what it looks like, anyway. If I had a cushy setup with a nice pretty noblewoman and all the poultry and game I could eat, I wouldn’t sneak off in the night to go back to sleeping in cold gutters. Doesn’t make sense.”

Recouped losses, Will thinks with a sudden, vicious anger. He feels his jaw go tight. “No,” he murmurs. “No, it really doesn’t.”

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Even as he walks in Will does his best not to telegraph the ice-cold wrath bubbling up in his belly, but something in the pitch of his steps must give him away, because Peter the stablehand takes one glance up at him and recoils like he wants to shield himself behind the broom in his hand. He could almost manage it, too, wiry wraith of a man that he is.

“H-hello,” he says, not looking up from his feet, head tilted awkwardly into the crook of his shoulder. “Afternoon. Will.”

He nods, paces quietly to a darker corner of stable, and takes a slow, deep breath. “Sir Ingram,” Will says, acid, “Runs dog fights. Was Cavall one of his, before?”

Peter’s bowed shoulders draw together warily and he gives an erratic shake of his head that drifts, reluctantly, until it becomes a nod. “He used to br-bring the dogs to me, sometimes, to patch up. When they got hurt,” he mutters as if to himself. “I h-helped her get free. I mean, I tr-tried to. Cut her leash.”

Will swallows. “So you know where he keeps them.”

Another more vigorous and even less convincing shake of his head. Will sighs, forces himself to breathe slow and even, and sinks down into a crouch on a nearby stool. Sits there until the tension feels less ready to shear and then clears his throat, speaking softly and carefully. “He took her back, Peter.”

Peter’s narrow, bearded face pulls inward with a twist of grief and his hands go tight around the handle of the broom.

He finishes his task in strained silence, most of his back turned to Will as he mulls his own reaction over. Sets the brush aside and goes to rearrange the tack hanging from the walls. When he does speak, the words are so low and muddled that Will takes a moment to separate the sounds out. “I think I hate him.”

“Hate is useful,” Will encourages. “It’s fuel. Incendiary.”

“No,” Peter refutes, pushing every word out as fast as it will trip off his tongue. “No. J-just dangerous. Easy to get burned.”

“I won’t let that happen,” he says, as earnestly as he vowed it the first time, standing and crossing to meet him shoulder to shoulder. “You’re not alone, Peter. I’m standing right beside you and I can help. I want to help you. And Cavall.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Peter darts a quick, halfhearted glance and squares his jaw. “He’s like a sh-shadow,” he explains, agitated. “Over me, behind me. Looming. And nobody else can see it, can tell wh-what he is.”

Will thinks furtively of his own long shadow, clinging close to his back, reaching for him with inky claws. The monstrous shade to Hannibal that no one else has witnessed and lived to speak of. The one he knows like a second heartbeat.

“I see him too,” Will promises. “And soon the rest of them will. We can bring him out into the light.”

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Will keeps one hand on the knife at his belt as he stalks through the choking throng of punters and drunken onlookers, hood drawn up to hide his face. Outside the sky is dark and roiling with an oncoming storm.

Plenty of bloodsport is staged in arenas, in castle courtyards, in grand tilting fields with pennants and stands, but Ingram’s hobby is the petty kind. A back room of a bar with a packed-dirt pit in the floor, a wooden frame to hold back the crowd, splashing beers and jostling for the best view. And a few cushioned seats at the back, raised above the rest for the most affluent patrons to set themselves apart, deal in gold and silver where the rest bet with sparse copper or nothing but jeering enthusiasm. Ingram’s is not the only blueblooded face among them that Will recognizes, though he might be smiling the widest.

The fighting is already started by the time Peter leads him through the door, which makes the crowd easier to navigate with any degree of subtlety, but the distant, muffled sounds of snarling and snapping and pained canine yelps make Will’s teeth grit hard and rough against each other in a slow grind.

The packed floor is slick and tacky with spilled drink and the smell of old cruor is bitter in the air. One of the dogs yelps hard and a cheer goes up through the patrons, several elbows jarring Will’s sides as he keeps his eyes on the ground and his hand, white-knuckled, on his knife.

“We have to. The — uh. Kennels are behind the stands,” Peter mutters with some difficulty, more the slurred shape of a word than sound, tilting his head toward the ritzier seats. His eyes are wide and flickering too quickly in the chaotic swell of noise and clustered bodies. “Un-underneath.”

Will catches him by the elbow to keep him steady and steers the both of them in the right direction. There’s a short run of slotted steps leading up to the raised dias and another that leads in the other direction, to a shrouded hallway half below the fighting pit, empty of the thronging crowds, and dark, and quiet.

Peter clutches tight to Will’s arm and takes a harsh, faltering breath as he pulls a purloined copy of a key from his pocket to twist into the lock on the door and heave it open.

A chorus of agitated barks start up in an instant at the disturbance and Will takes in the rattle of chains as captive fighting dogs batter the barred fronts of a long row of wire cages. Cavall’s mottled brown-and-white muzzle stays tucked low to the dirt, cowering at the back of her cramped berth, though she musters a low growl. Will tastes blood hot and sour on his tongue. Smells it thick and cloying in the close air.

He looks over his shoulder, meets Peter's eyes, and nods.

They set to work on the rusted wire, filing into the weak points, snapping open the cages inch by inch. The first hounds growl and snap at encroaching hands, wary and lashing out, dangerously close to catching their gloved fingers, but Will hisses sternly until they back down. Others snuffle and whine lowly as they work, tails wagging. Mastiffs and spaniels and alaunts all ragged with old scars and torn ears and flea-bitten hides. Ribs showing under brindled coats like grasping fingers. One uncowed terrier, scarcely knee-high, yips fiercely at Will like a beast ten times his size. He grins with crooked pride and pries open another door.

One after another the kennels are dismantled, bent wire and broken wood curling out in a thicket, the animals inside sniffing cautiously at the new-open doors in front of them. Peter bends to slip the collars from their necks, chains dropping to the dust with a heavy chuff.

Cavall's head perks up when they reach her pen and she presses her muzzle gratefully to a space between two bars, soft whinging breaths caught in her throat, licking at Will's fingers while he rasps open the bolt. Her tail thumps against the floor in a grateful drumbeat. When the door falls open she all but tackles him to the floor in haste to clamber into his arms.

Will buries his face into her fur and lets out a ragged sigh. Peter's face is pale with unease, and his wiry hands tremble as he loosens another collar.

"There's–" he murmurs, patting frenetically at the protruding spine of one mutt while the terrier worries its crooked teeth on the hem of his tunic. "T-too many. Dozens." His thready voice is tense with uncertainty. "Not enough room at the stables." He bends to free another and his brows draw together briefly in a mixed joyous sorrow. "Oh, this one's going to have puppies."

Will smiles tightly as Cavall licks his jaw. "They can't stay here," he says. "Not like this. I'll speak to Beverly, Lady Alana. Lord Hannibal, even. We'll find a place for as many as we can. But we get them all out of the building tonight, before anyone finds us here. Turn them loose and let them run. Is that the back way, through there?" He tilts his head at a cellar hatch on the far side of the room, double barred.

"It is." Peter shuffles to his feet with two of the dogs in his arms and another three close on his heels, eyes darting nervously toward the door they came through. "Okay," he says, thinly. "O-kay. How long can you give me?"

Will clutches tight at Cavall and then releases her, jaw set. "Minutes," he grits. "I'm not sure. As long as I can."

Peter clears his throat, whistles kindly at the fighting dogs and watches ears and tails perk up. The pack flock after him, limping and hesitant but eager. Cavall alone stays at Will's heel, pawing eagerly at his leg until he tuts sharply and shakes his head. She steps back and lets him turn away with only a faint whine.

Overhead, the crowd is cheering, shouts and curses and jeers and sottish laughter. Will sidles through the door and up the shrouded steps, darts back behind the raised dias where the knights place their bets and watch the fights play out. His eyes trace over the old, dry timbers of the building frame and make a few calculations as he takes a flint and tinder from his belt.

Hate makes a good incendiary. The fire catches fast.

He picks through the crowd, around the edges of the room, starts a small flame in any hidden corner he can find. By the time he circles back around to where he began the smoke is beginning to fill the close, sour air with a hazy tinge. Most of the patrons aren't sober enough to take notice, but Will watches Sir Ingram's face, among the throng. Sees his nose wrinkle and his cold eyes narrow.

Will flattens his back against the wood frame and turns his face away. He calls out "Fire!" in a timbre as unlike his own as he can manage. It doesn't take long for the others to take up the call, once the dam is broken.

The snarling fight in the central pit that had been drawing so much focus until now suddenly ceases to hold the crowd's attention, as the smoke thickens and the panic starts. Will watches patrons elbow and

shove past one another in a rush for the exits, shouts increasing in pitch and volume. He plants himself between the crowd and the short stairwell down to the kennels, but none of the groundlings make to flee in that direction, all clustering past the bar to the front, spilling out into the streets. The wealthier patrons clamber down from their high seats and elbow past them in turn, running the same way.

Nobody moves to collar the combatants in the fighting pit, backed away to circle one another nervously, snarling and growling at the chaotic swell of the departing crowd. Will shoulders past a few of the stampeding clientele, ducks under the banister and drops into the packed sawdust, whistling one of the signals he heard from Tier and his wolves during the hunt. The dogs' ears flatten, and they go still, hackles raised.

One of the pair, a wolfhound favoring a badly mangled leg, looks to have been going the way of losing the bout. Will locks an arm around its neck to keep it from turning to sink teeth into him and cradles it to his chest, stumbles back for the kennel as the fire catches in earnest, straw going up in crackling red sparks. He hopes the whole place is flattened to blackened kindling by dawn.

"W-will," Peter greets him, voice sharp and jagged with worry, eyes a little glassy. He takes the fighting hound into his arms with a swallow as Will hands his burden over. The last cages are empty, the chains scattered haphazardly underfoot, holding nothing but the empty air. "Is that everyone?"

"One more," he says and turns to rush back up the stairs for the other abandoned fighter. He doesn't quite get there before the door slams open from the other side.

Ingram stalks in with the point of his sword preceding him, leveled straight at the hollow of Will's throat as his cold eyes rake over the scene. Smiling with nothing but slick ice behind the curve of his white teeth. "What," he says brightly. "Do we have here?"

Will steps back in time with the advance of the weapon, jaw tight. Behind him, Peter dips in a hurried bow, the injured dog wrapped tight in the folds of his cloak.

"M-milord," he mutters in fearful deference. "We–we just–"

"What the *fuck*," Ingram says, with a tilt of his head and a glare that flickers between the both of them. "Did you do to my *dogs*?"

"Don't know what you're talking about," Will says in a flat voice dripping with ire, shifting to place himself between the knight and the stablehand. "I don't see any dogs here, do you?"

"Just this one. It's h-hurt," Peter chimes in shakily. "But I think he belongs to Sir James."

"Shut up," Ingram bellows, slamming his free hand against the wall. His eyes flash with more vitality than Will has ever seen in them before, blazing bright with fury. A handful of the other knights from the dias stagger down the stairs behind him and into the empty kennel, red-faced and coughing from the thick billowing smoke. They watch Ingram circle with his sword drawn and his shoulders tight in anger.

Above all their heads, one of the roof beams cracks and gives way, the impact shaking the ground underfoot. Will feels a bitter grin crack the corners of his mouth. "So much for investments, hm?"

Ingram snarls, and his face is ugly with roiling hatred. "*You*. You think because you're Lecter's little kept boy I won't hack your insolent head off your shoulders?"

“Oh, no,” Will goads as Peter backs away toward the door. “I’m sure you’ll try.”

He does make an attempt, swinging wild and wide, blind anger telegraphing the wind-up of the motion so well that Will sidesteps it with ease, ducks and weaves and brings his dagger up to parry another blow. He sees Peter lift the hatch and secure the escape of the injured hound out of the corner of his eye and grits his teeth harder, shifting defensively until Ingram drives him into a corner, feet caught in the broken chains.

Will’s back hits the wall and he hears a familiar low growl, sees a flash of russet and white as Ingram raises the sword again.

Cavall moves like a blur when she lunges and her teeth tear into the knight’s bare arm with ferocious abandon. She snarls through her mouthful of mauled flesh as Ingram shouts, fumbling his blade, unable to follow through the strike. He recovers with a sneer, shakes the dog off and drives her back with a vicious kick to the ribs. Will recoils and Peter lets out a sharp cry of pain, mirroring her yelp, giving it a human echo like he’s voicing it on her behalf.

Then Ingram whirls, brings down his sword in a red flash, and they are both silent.

Will’s breath catches and his blood runs ice cold. He looks to the knight, blood dripping down his wrist in a sluggish trickle, and the motionless lump of fur at his feet. Ingram huffs a short, triumphant breath, cold as the driven snow, not even the echo of an echo of regret in the flat sheen of his face. Only a distant twitch of disappointment at an asset wasted. He locks his eyes on Will again and tightens his grip.

Will feels his lip pull back readily in a defensive snarl, but within a fraction of a second Ingram steps forward, jolts in surprise, and crumples to his knees. He blinks once, slowly, and then falls flat on his face in the dirt. The sound of the impact registers a little later. A dull, hollow clang of wood on bone.

Peter stands over him with the oak board that used to bar the door still raised overhead and then lowers it slowly, letting it drop to sink into a crouch beside Cavall. His hand reaches out, quivering, to rest on her head.

He stays there, petting her with shoulders shaking, until the knights drag him to his feet, haul the both of them away as the flames lick up the thatched roof and the snow turns to misting rain.

Chapter End Notes

content warnings expanded: if this fic had a page on the "does the dog die" wiki? I would as of now have to specify that the answer is yes. Sometimes you make discoveries in the act of writing and sometimes the discovery is that you are about to take an action that makes you give yourself a long hard look in the mirror and say "ah shit. gotta kill that dog" and you did not PLAN TO --

WE'RE IN A PICKLE NOW HUH. but also in the penultimate arc of this fic and the one I have been *most* looking forward to. Yes I have said that about every arc but they have all been exciting to me

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

content warnings: some Canon Typical Graphic Violence And Death here again!

alright so I did manage to sneak in a little writing time between hosting gigs so I AM posting at my regular slot but I am officially to a place where I have one completed buffer chapter, which is the amount I'd like to keep going until I'm all done just in case I find something to go back and edit, so I'm gonna post each of the last several chapters As i finish the new one. Really appreciate all the cheering on because in terms of length and breadth this is the biggest fic I've ever undertaken! I'm usually a short and sweet type o author and this is a fun change of pace but it IS kind of a marathon to me

quick joke aside that felt WAY too raw to append to the end notes of last chapter but: (will voice) I can excuse cannibalism, but I draw the line at animal cruelty / (alana voice) you can excuse cannibalism?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The shovel sinks into the earth, ripping up wildflowers and green clover, tearing away the undergrowth to show the dark topsoil under the roots. Will can feel his palms sting with the effort as he tears open old calluses, sweat beading on the nape of his neck, the taste of dirt in his mouth. It takes a long time to make the hole deep enough.

“Can I help?”

Will throws another shovelful of earth to the side and wipes the perspiration from his face. “Do you want to? It's not easy work.”

Abigail watches from beneath the shade of an elm, face shrouded, hair loose and blowing in the wind. Her eyes are bright with sympathetic sorrow. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to do it alone.”

Swallowing tightly, Will sinks the blade of the shovel in again, tamps it down with his heel. “I am alone.”

“Sure,” she sighs, “If you want to be pigheaded about it. Come on. I’m not real or anything, but I’m with you every way I can be.”

He pauses, feet sinking into the black soil. “Because I made a place for you.”

“For all of us.” Abigail smiles sadly, then bends to take up the bundle he left under the shade of the trees, heavy in her arms. She strides over to meet him in the half-dug grave and lowers Cavall to rest at their feet, curled in on herself like a newborn whelp, eyes not yet open. The flat of her palm presses to the dog’s flank, petting affectionately. “It’s so beautiful here. Peaceful. You can hear the stream just over the next hill. Birds singing, fish biting, sun shining.”

“Plenty of room to run,” he says, tightly. “I w–” his throat closes around the words and he exhales, slowly. Starts again. “I just wanted her to be free.”

“She will be,” Abigail promises, pushing handfuls of soil back into the hollow he carved in the earth, blanketing her in the quiet warmth and dark. “I’ll take care of her, Will.”

He looks around the meadow with stinging eyes and nods. Turns to her with a plaintive, searching look. “I’m sorry I can’t stay.”

“Go,” she says, “We’ll be fine on our own.” She tilts her head, a faint smile flickering over her lips. Her voice goes airy, teasing. “Someone’s waiting for you.”

Will opens his eyes and finds Lord Hannibal watching him through the bars. His face is a cliffside without a foothold, smooth and polished and hard.

He lets the silence shroud them a moment longer, considering, not breaking his gaze. Will is not particularly moved to speak. His wrists chafe unpleasantly under the shackles and his back aches where it's been pressed to the cold stone of the wall all night. His tongue, if he tried to put it to use, would be dry and slow and heavy, and so he settles for a stiff bend of his neck in a rusty approximation of a bow.

Hannibal watches and silently extends one arm, beckoning. Beverly appears over his shoulder, wan and worried, fumbling for the keys.

The door opens and Lord Lecter’s hand remains extended. Inviting.

Will blinks as Beverly ducks over to him, kneels and unlocks the cuffs at his wrists while awkwardly avoiding eye contact. He looks between her and Hannibal and pushes himself to his feet, stiff and sore. Bev reaches out to brace him as he stumbles and he offers her a brusque flash of a smile that goes unanswered.

He straightens and does as has quickly become habitual – following Hannibal’s lead. The direction Hannibal leads him in is not a surprise, for all his body language has remained steadfastly unreadable. The door to his solar swings shut behind them with a familiar heavy groan and the fire crackles softly in the grate. Will can still feel the grit of riverbank soil under his nail beds, though he knows it would not be there if he looked.

“Well,” Hannibal says, pacing a slow, steady circuit around the chamber, hands clasped at the small of his back. “We are overdue for a discussion, aren’t we, Will?”

Will braces himself against the back of a dark oak chair and lets his jaw work a moment, gradually finds his voice where it has been caught at the back of his throat. “Are we?”

Hannibal turns to him with a longsuffering air, one brow floating up, and retrieves a scroll of parchment from his side table. “Clark Ingram passed the better part of my morning calling for your head. He’s been extremely insistent. Presented me with quite an impressive laundry list of charges – wanton destruction of property, theft, arson, breach of the peace. I believe he might have been working his way around to naming you for a witch and suggesting that you ought to be purged with fire, but unfortunately our time ran short.”

Will snorts. “If a strong breeze knocked a feather off his helmet Sir Ingram would find a way to blame me for it.”

“In future, when you decide to tie a snare around your neck,” Hannibal censures, cutting him off, acid enough to make his face burn. “I hope you will do me the simple courtesy of telling me in advance.”

“I can mind my own neck,” Will says mulishly.

“Evidently,” Hannibal says, setting down the parchment with a sharp thud. “Not well enough.”

Will grits his teeth and pushes himself off the back of the chair, standing stiffly to attention. He feels his pulse rabbiting under his skin, braced for a blow though he knows that his body expects it based on a historical precedent that does not apply in this instance. Mason would have drawn blood by now. If Hannibal has an upper limit that would spur him to the same extemporaneous blunt discipline, Will has hardly pushed hard enough to find it yet. But that violence is what he understands.

Hannibal breathes out slowly and his eyes go keen and bright. “It was rashly done, but we may embrace the golden opportunity that this affair presents us, nevertheless.”

He turns his back and opens the door to a cabinet. Will shifts his weight from foot to foot, watching warily. “An opportunity for what?”

It takes only a moment to find and retrieve the object of his search before Hannibal returns with a stoppered, narrow-necked glass bottle full of something that shines like sunlight caught in cut crystal. He waits in expectation for Will to seat himself gingerly in the high-backed oak chair, then pours a shallow measure. “Krupnikas,” he explains with the usual lilt of a self-indulgent smile. “A spiced honey tincture, stronger than mead or wine. Distilled for concentrated purity of flavor.”

Will takes the drink in hand and turns it over thoughtfully. A sweet, burning scent wafts up from the swirling gold.

“You are sworn to my service,” Hannibal finally elaborates, looming into Will’s space. “And your discipline is my responsibility. Which gives me the final say in the matter of accusations brought against you, even by a person of Ingram's considerable status. I can dismiss them all. But I cannot extend the same grace to the other accused party.” Will’s fingers tighten on the cup and he looks up into the smooth planes of Hannibal’s face. His lips are curved softly into an elusive upward bend. “Sir Ingram has asked for trial by combat.”

Will wets his lips, something roiling dark in his chest. He tastes anger, bitter and cloying. “Not a very well-matched fight,” he argues tersely. “A knight against a stablehand.”

“I believe considerations of equitability have very little bearing on the proposal,” Hannibal refutes blithely, circling the back of the chair, seating himself across from Will with the sunlight through the curtains falling over his face in a bright sliver. “Much more to do with righting a perceived insult. It was your friend Peter, was it not, who struck my first knight over the head with a spar of wood?”

Will’s eyeteeth catch at his lips with the force of his snarl. “Should have struck him harder.”

“And,” Hannibal pitches forward, elbows resting on his knees, head tilted slightly oblique as if to peer past the veil to the dark swarming flies at the core of him. “I suspect Sir Ingram knows that you will feel any penance he takes out on Master Bernardone as deeply as if it were enacted on you, perhaps doubly so because you will be obliged to watch and unable to intercede. It’s a very elegant solution he’s devised to avenge himself against the both of you in one fell swoop. Quite watertight. I admire the artistry of it immensely.”

Blank, searing anger flashes white behind Will’s eyes for a moment. “And you’re going to let him do whatever he wants, is that it? Anyone who stands up to him, he can cut them down and make a public spectacle and get away with it?”

Hannibal's eyebrow twitches, but there's a faint curl of something like a smile hiding away at the corner of his mouth. "He's perfectly entitled to declare a challenge, Will."

"But–" Will bites, remembers the cup in his hand a moment before he forgets himself and upsets it, clings harder and forces himself to look up at Hannibal, really look and parse carefully through the unspoken words lying beneath the ones that trip off his tongue. He sucks in a slow, calculating breath. "If it's me he's really after," Will says, softly. "Why not give him what he wants in the first place?"

The faint flicker of a smile shows on Lord Lecter's cheek and he brings his own cup to his face to veil the expression. He says nothing, though his silence speaks with noise and clarity.

"Trial by combat's a chivalric game, there are codes. Stipulations. Peter's not a trained fighter and he's *entitled* to a champion," Will posits, with a thin, savage grin. "I'll stand in his place."

He knows by the bright flicker in Hannibal's eyes that he's struck upon the intended target, though his mouth goes thin in a mimicry of lordly concern. "I hope you understand the risk you would be undertaking, Will."

"Oh, I think I understand." He tilts forward, searching eagerly through the cast shadows on Hannibal's face. "You *want* me to face Ingram. Not just that. You want me to kill him."

This time there is no mistaking the darkness that flares in Hannibal's pupils, or the grin that flashes behind the curve of his cup. "My wolf," he says serenely. "What a vicious appetite you have."

"You had your part in altering it," Will says, a little snide.

Hannibal hums and taps his fingertips slowly on the arm of the seat. "Sir Ingram begins to overestimate his value to me. Pride, as I have often heard, goes before a fall."

Will feels the points of his teeth showing as he smiles. "So he's a problem. Hunting is problem solving."

Hannibal's eyes flash darkly before his face falls into a brief likeness of regret. "What kind of a lord would I be, Will, if I were to be seen arranging for the death of a loyal liegeman? Or swaying the balance of a fight in favor of my best beloved champion? It would not do. Although I admit to an interest in seeing your work firsthand."

Will's face prickles with heat, but he doesn't back away, only swallows and bows his head. "I don't expect any favors, my Lord. All I need is luck."

Hannibal smiles, soft and low, and raises his cup. Will mirrors the motion, watching the sun flare as it strikes the silver rim. "Then I will wish you the very best of luck," he agrees. "And happy hunting."

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The second night he passes in the dungeons is easier. His hands are unbound now and his focus is sharper, clearer than before. When the rushing clear ripple of the stream trickles past him, he leaves his fishing pole and reaches for the longbow that Lecter once snapped in two. Finds a quiver of arrows fletched by small, clever hunters' hands. Strings it with a heavy draw that makes his shoulders ache with every inch of taut intention. Notches an arrow and rests the string at the corner of his mouth, shuts one eye and lets it go.

Peter, in the neighboring cell, is quiet and still, worrying aimlessly at the hem of one sleeve with his head tucked low. Will shifts closer and waits until he's acknowledged with a faltering, sidelong glance before he explains the situation in a low, terse murmur. Peter nods along, jaw working without speaking.

"M'sorry," he replies eventually, in a sorrowful whisper, crooked fingers pulling at the linen.

"Don't," Will refutes. "Please. I made a promise, Peter, and I don't intend to let you down. I can't – can't help Cavall. But I can help you."

"It's not that." Peter's head drops back and his face tilts up toward the ceiling. After another moment he clears his throat. "I'm grateful. I'm just s-sorry you have to fight again."

A dry laugh bubbles from Will's throat, tight and incredulous. "Why? It's what I do best."

"But you don't like it." His eyes flicker swiftly over Will's way again and drop low. "I saw. How you looked at the dogs. Cutting them free like you wanted to give them something you can't have." He shrugs one shoulder. "I don't know what's st-stopping you, but. I wish I could help."

"Doesn't matter." The words slide off Will's tongue with a mordant dishonesty, thin and copper-tinged, and he feels choked out, the brand burning over his heart, the heavy collar bearing down against the back of his neck. "Let me worry about you. Don't worry about me."

Peter nods, sparsely, more appeasing than anything, and worries at the sleeve again. When Will glances down again he can see for the first time a flash of movement there. Peter's hand turns over to let Will see the soft dun shape of a mouse cupped in his palm, curled up prim and perfectly content. One corner of his mouth tilts up in a fond flicker of a grin and Peter looks abashed but proud.

It doesn't matter so much, having to twist himself into ugly shapes, if he can spare someone kinder the indignity.

"Will," Beverly interrupts with a gentle knock against the bars that makes him turn his head. "It's time."

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There's a square traced in chalk in the center of the courtyard, demarcating the boundaries of the dueling ground and already ringed with a gathering audience before the sun has finished cresting the hills. Will buckles his brigandine embossed with the Lecter snake and stag and watches Ingram's squire tighten the straps of his pauldron, fret over the intricate fastenings of the shiny plate that envelops him like gilt on rotten wood. He notes with macabre pride the blossoming green-black bruise high on the knight's temple, nearly hidden by his close-cropped hair.

He looks for Hannibal and does not have to look far before he finds him, watching from the balcony that overlooks the cloistered yard, robed in blue as rich and deep as nightfall, gloved hands resting delicately on the balustrade so he resembles a stone guardian poised to overlook the hold.

Just over his left shoulder, closest amidst the other courtiers, Lady Alana is hovering with a red-rimmed cast to her eyes and a worried pall over her lovely face. Strange and sad not to see Cavall nosing at her sleeve. Her attention flickers restlessly from Ingram to Will.

Price offers up a slightly roughshod but sturdy old helm with a hopeful tilt of his chin. "Don't let the bastard put a dent in your pretty mush, yeah?"

Will returns him a tight smile and a polite shake of his head. “Thanks, Jimmy, I’m all good.”

“This is stupid,” Bev breathes, so softly that Will only hears it because she’s standing so close at his side. “This is stupid and you are the biggest idiot this side of the antipodes, and I am going to stand over your dead body and say *I told you so*.”

The smile on Will’s face goes even tighter. “You really don’t think I have a snowball’s chance in hell?”

“I do,” another voice chimes, and the smile drops off Will’s face completely in surprise. He cranes his head back to blink at Zeller, who goes a little splotched with pink under his patchy beard. He reaches out and claps his own sword into Will’s hands, eyes darting away in self-conscious agitation. It’s a light blade, well balanced, well honed. Better than Will could have hoped for from his pick of the armory’s surplus stock. “You’re, uh. Really damn stubborn, Graham. He might knock you down, but you won’t stay down.”

“Thanks,” Will huffs, “I think.”

The horn blows somewhere above them and Lord Hannibal steps forward. The other guards look to one another and back away. “Give him hell,” Bev murmurs as she goes.

“It’s a beautiful morning,” Hannibal greets, his mild, clear bell of a voice carrying on the chill of the air. “A fine day to settle grievances by the fairest possible means at our disposal. Sir Ingram, you have been done an injury. Though you have your suspicion of the perpetrator, you have neither confession nor witness to sustain it. Therefore it is only right to let the question of guilt be ordained by a wager of battle. Would you have the contest to first blood, or further?”

With the sallet balanced in his hand, Ingram’s cold eyes flicker between the balcony and Will’s side of the field, offering a blank, icy glance. “As far as it needs to go to finish the matter, my Lord.”

Hannibal turns to Will with a veneer of professional distance that’s likely well-crafted enough to fool anyone who sees him less clearly than Will does. His dark eyes glisten with excitement. “Well, Mister Graham? Are you amenable?”

Will tilts his chin up, defiant and wordless.

“Then we had best get the thing underway now, hadn’t we?” Hannibal raises his hand, and the horn blows again.

Ingram sets the sallet on his head with one gauntleted hand, hiding his blank face behind a wall of steel. He draws his sword, long and gleaming like white fire. Will clutches the weapon Zeller left in his hands and adjusts his grip to the stance Beverly taught him. They mirror one another, drifting close enough to properly size the other up. Ingram’s thin mouth shows a mirthless smile. “I’m not unreasonable, Will,” he assures the moment he’s close enough to speak in confidence. “I’ll accept an unconditional surrender. I’m willing to work for it, if you’re determined to be a brat, but I want you to know that I’m a very merciful man.”

“Good to know,” Will says, bracing his shoulder. “I’m not.”

He lets Ingram strike out first and turns with the force of the blow, deflecting it as he did in the pit of the empty kennel, stepping lightly out of harm's way. Easiest way to wind him up, by dodging all his hits and then look for an opening while he's unbalanced.

But Sir Ingram's on better footing now than he was the last time he came at Will, less foolhardy with ire and more calculated. A stronger fighter. Will's experienced in making murder, not melee. His strikes fly swift and hard and Will is grateful for the late long hours of sparring drills, just barely able to keep up with blocking the blows, breathless with spent effort. He stays on the defensive, mirroring every slash and stab and step forward with a parry and a retreat and a ragged exhale through gritted teeth. The air carries an early spring chill, but sweat beads on his brow under the glare of the eastern sun, every flash reflected off of gleaming plate nearly blinding in its icy light.

Bright steel bites a shallow runnel across the outside of his arm, blood gleaming jewel-red in the sunlight, and Will hisses. The little of Ingram's mouth visible beneath his helm curves into a triumphant grin. As Will flinches back from the hit the assembled crowd draw a breath. Some use it to grimace, and many to cheer.

Ingram twirls his sword to show off the new color adorning the point. Will glances up to Hannibal and sees nothing in the impassive plane of his face, though Alana's has gone stark and white. He takes a shaky breath, letting the stinging cold of the shallow cut bring him focus. This is a test and he will not fail.

Will shifts back into his defensive stance, steps a half-circle around the cobbles, and looks for his opportunity. It won't come by waiting for Ingram to get frustrated of chasing him around and it won't come by trying to outlast him. Ingram is a man who doesn't mind playing with his food.

But it might come, he thinks, by letting him get cocky.

He blinks and in the fluttering half-second his eyes are shut he sees it, as if drawn out from the air, a flash of light and color and possibility – Ingram standing over Will, swaggering, waiting for a cry of mercy that he knows Will would never give. He'll raise his weapon to bring it down in an ostentatious finishing blow and leave the gap between the plates of his armor open, just under the arm, primed for Will to surge up and shove his sword in fast and deep. He'll skewer him sideways through the heart so Ingram can look down in anguish and watch himself die. He'll crumple with a groan and a clatter of steel, and Will will rise to his feet the victor. Lord Hannibal's eyes will flare dark with controlling pride, bright with vicious joy.

It's a good plan.

Will casts his thoughts further, as Ingram drives him back, advances again with another series of quick strikes he can barely turn aside or stop. If he kills on Hannibal's orders now he won't ever stop. The temptation will be too great to leave vengeance and the Vergers behind. Let himself be changed. Let Hannibal call him a good wolf, solicitous and possessive, offering up his poisonous pride and affection and then offering up a piece of his kill like a hunter sharing quarry with the dogs. Urging him on to the next hunt, and the next, and the next, miring him lovingly in spilled blood until the last gasping echoes of remembering what it was like to be anything but a well-loved weapon fade into silence. Until he rots from the inside out, hollowed, dead, gone.

Even if he gets his reckoning, there's been no other future but that stretching out before him for so long he's all but surrendered to it. Mason would break him the same way. Just because Hannibal would seal it with a kiss does not undo the cruelty of making him lose himself.

He feints a stagger back as Ingram's next hit makes his weak shoulder buckle, and nearly loses his footing, half blinded with sweat and sun, pulse pounding in his ears. Sees the knight take notice of his advantage and press it. The onlookers watch with bated breath.

Will goes through the calculated motions, lets Ingram press him until his knee buckles, lets it hit the ground with a sharp crack. Shifts his weight to prepare for the surprise attack.

“Well,” Sir Ingram croons, softly, “Let’s hear it, Graham. Have an apology for me? Or will you make me put another dog down, hm?”

His eyes flicker over Ingram’s shoulder to find Hannibal on his high balcony. In the inscrutable mask of his face under the circlet of iron antlers, he sees the bright flicker of understanding. He spots the trick Will is planning. His lip twitches. He approves of it immensely.

Maybe it’s too late to save himself, Will thinks, with a sudden rush of conviction. But he might as well die trying.

“You force my hand,” Ingram sighs, and lifts his arm for the kill.

Will lunges.

He darts forward instead of up toward the fatal weak point he had planned, ducks and rolls and swings his sword out to sweep the legs out from under the knight. Ingram hits the ground with a surprised whoosh of breath, eyes wide and white through his visor. Before he can do more than suck another confused breath into his lungs Will bares his teeth and slashes out with his sword in a swift, precise movement, cleaving the leather straps of his greaves and slicing through both of his legs at the back of the knee, deep and brutal. There’s a finite popping sound from each cut tendon. The kind of injury that ends a man’s fighting days, that marks him for life. A roar of mixed horror and applause goes up from the onlookers. Ingram shouts in pain, fumbling his sword to clutch feebly at one hobbled leg, breathless with shock. He blanches in sudden terror as Will rises back to his feet.

“Don’t,” he gasps weakly, eyes flashing to the sword still clutched in Will’s hand, bloodied palms raised to the sky. “Oh, god, please, craven. *Craven!”*

Will glances back at him with disdain and turns the sword over in his hand. “What do you know,” he huffs, leaning down and pitching the words only for Ingram’s ringing ears. “Look at that. Maybe I’m more merciful than I thought.”

Slowly, deliberately, he unlaces his fingers and lets the sword fall to the ground. Looks up and to the left of Lord Hannibal as he gives a terse, wordless bow.

Cheers and gasps rise to a fever pitch, thunderous applause roaring through the onlookers at the show Will put on, but none, he thinks, from Hannibal. The hairs on the back of Will’s neck stand on end, and his skin hums with a quiet sense of power, of excitement, of gut-wrenching fear. The blood rushes like a churning flood in his ears and his pulse beats in his throat, frantic, loud as the hollow drumming of wings.

Chapter End Notes

yeah.....as in canon real Who Gets Humperdink moments but its about AUTONOMY. its about the breaking of shackles and cycles....hope that works out for you mr graham....

ah shit running late to my d&d game.....ahh.....ok POST. POSTING FRANTICALLY.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

HI YES that did take a little longer than I wanted to take to get another buffer chapter polished off, apologies! I will confess also I joined a discord and got quite distracted trying to finish up a different fic for them which has ALSO begun to grow legs and run away from me. Very grateful for your patience as we slip out of regular weekly update mode into laying the tracks down directly in front of the moving train looney-tunes style

content warnings: explicit sexual content.....yeah you know it! you get it! and the usual graphic violence being kind of woven into everything

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Disobedience is a heady feeling, and Will is drunk on it. He wades through the crowd with the ripple of the stream in his ears and the rest of the world at a shrouded, muffled distance. Offers up a smile as he's mobbed affectionately by Bev, Jimmy, and Zeller in turn, hands clapping him on the shoulders and excited murmurs in his ear. Then the hands that press him are less familiar, other servants and soldiers gleefully bestowing their well-wishes for his win, eyes wide in awe and a little fear. Will shrugs them all off eventually and makes a beeline for the safety of the keep.

Another hand catches him in passing, and Will looks up into Jack Crawford's solemn face in a dizzy flash, blinking at the sudden apparition, uncertain for a moment if he is imagining it. “Well fought,” his old friend murmurs with a wink and a nod, and Will nods back as if to a stranger. He walks on clutching the crumpled fragment of a note tucked away in his palm.

The armory door closes behind him like a tomb. Will slumps with his back to the wood and sucks in a shuddering breath. He glances down at the missive and the exhalation trembles into a breathy laugh. Mason Verger eagerly awaits an update on his progress. Tugging the line like the impatient fisherman he is. Or jerking on his lead.

He marks the place and the time set for the meeting and crumples the note again with a sigh. It's even odds he’ll be in any fit state to make the rendezvous, once Hannibal catches up to him. He's well and truly sunk his teeth into the hand that fed him, now. He can taste blood sour on his tongue.

Will unbuckles the brigandine with shaky hands, tosses it aside, strips off his armor and scatters it over the floor in fits and starts.

The knock at the door comes sooner than expected, sudden as the peal of a death knell. Will goes very still, turns back and squares his shoulders. “It’s unlocked.”

It opens again with a creak, but the visitor who stands at the threshold is not the one he expected to see. He wishes, bleakly, for a little of that armor back.

Alana’s face is as wan now as it had looked from a distance, looking down over the courtyard. Her pink lips are pressed thin and her jewel-clear eyes are full of hard, sharp facets. She takes in his state of undress, tunic plastered to his skin with sweat, and falters. “Will,” she starts, brushes past him into the room to let the door fall shut behind her. “I wanted to make sure you were alright.”

“I’m alright.” Will blinks at her, watching, wary. “*You* seem troubled.”

“Troubled,” she echoes faintly, as her brows draw together, then nods, circling the room, skirts swirling at her feet. “I’m confused,” she explains after a moment. “I have been confused. I’m re-evaluating my assumptions about you.”

“Stepping back to see the full picture?”

“You’re hiding behind a veil,” Alana says in a thin, sharp, warning tone. “Gossamer thin, like a shroud with a loose weave. I’m trying to draw conclusions based on what I keep glimpsing through the gaps.” She hesitates and her chin trembles when she whispers, “The truth is that I think you’re *dangerous*, Will.”

He bites his tongue, feeling the sting of the accusation. “I’ve spilled blood before, my Lady. When it was necessary. I’ve been honest enough about that. Saved lives. You’ve commended me for it.”

“You were cruel. You were *reveling* in cruelty.”

“I gave him a taste of his own medicine,” Will seethes.

“No, Will, you gave him yours.” Alana’s eyes roam over him again and again, searching, wide and white, and she steps closer, reaches out to grasp his hand between both of hers, holding it fast. “Will,” she repeats. “Please. There is a question that I need to ask you and I want you to give me an honest answer.”

“I can be honest,” he avers evasively, resisting the urge to tug his arm away. “I am honest.”

“What happened to Abigail?” she asks, and the breath punches out of his chest. He ducks his head and hides from the piercing light of her eyes, tries to avoid the watery fear shining in them. “Was it truly a fever that killed her?”

The juxtaposition of the trepidation and the question strike a harsh, dissonant chord in Will’s head and he feels his throat close like a snare. “Are you accusing me of something, Lady Bloom?”

The grip on his arm goes tight and she pleads, “*Will*.”

Will looks helplessly away to the horned hunter with his face a mask of blood and mire, towering over him, clutching Abigail to his chest like a fawn and dragging her father’s knife across her neck. In the dark of every night it’s all he sees, branded behind his eyelids, but Alana can’t see it. She sees the backscattering echoes through a concave mirror, all the shadows distorted and murky. Will standing where he stood.

“I think you already know it wasn’t an illness,” he admits in a rasping croak. Alana’s face crumples.

“God,” she breathes, drops her hands from his and looks away, shoulders quaking. “Oh my god. I was hoping it wasn’t true.”

“Alana,” Will entreats, but her face has already gone bloodless, looking at him the way everyone looks at Will when they see the shine of his teeth in the dark, the blood on his hands. Like deer in the chase, hunted and afraid.

“That little girl looked up to you,” she says, stark and fearful and furious. “You were her *hero*, Will, you were meant to *protect* her. I didn’t think you were the one she’d need protection from, but maybe I was mistaken.”

Will growls, low under his breath, unsteady on his feet. “No. *No*, you have this wrong, alright? I didn’t – I wouldn’t–”

Phantom blood seeps from the eviscerating wound in his belly, drips in a frantic heartbeat to the stone floor, but all the explanations stick on his tongue in a coarse jumble. There’s too many things he really is guilty of to plead innocence on the one charge that matters above all the rest, and the truth is that he’s so tied up in Hannibal now that he feels *complicit*, like every act of Hannibal’s hands is equally his responsibility, his doing, backward and forward in time. He doesn’t know how to separate himself from that feeling, not after letting it sink so deep under his skin that it stains the marrow of his bones.

Alana hiccups around a wet sob and stays at her wary distance. “I wish I believed that,” she says weakly.

Will’s jaw is clenched tight and the light, buzzing sensation he’d left the field of battle with has turned to a dizzy, tilting vertigo. “I did not *kill my daughter*, Alana,” he insists, coarse and raw, because her blood never truly washed off his hands either way. He held her as she died, tried to hold her slit throat shut with numb, clammy fingers, tried to keep hold of her in the rising darkness, but could not manage either to keep her from slipping away or to slip away along with her as he should have done.

Her piercing, cold eyes drag the depths of him for answers, for an explanation, and she sucks in a chary breath. “Then why would you lie about it?” she says, wounded. “Who *did*?”

The second knocks comes before the truth can claw its way out of Will’s throat and he and Alana startle in unison, turning to the silhouette in the open doorway. Will’s eyes flicker to the cast shadows of antlers on the stone, first. “Lord Hannibal,” he demurs, addressing the figure with a deferential bow.

Alana wipes her face with one woolen sleeve and leans heavily against the wall at her back, trying to make herself look a little more composed. Will doesn’t bother, his face flushed with sweat and anguish in equal measures.

Hannibal has the calculated contrition writ on his face of a man who had no intention of stumbling into an intimate conversation and the glint in his eye of a man who was half inclined to sit and eavesdrop a while longer. He tilts his head in polite chagrin. “I apologize for the interruption. I only wanted to offer my congratulations on the outcome of the match. Can you spare Will’s company, dear Alana? Or have I caught you at an awkward moment.”

“I think we’re done here,” Will answers on her behalf and a little shortly.

She looks to him, still wary and hurt and grieving anew for the girl who was never her child but briefly her charge. Grieving too the part of Will she thought she understood, that she very nearly loved. “Yes,” she echoes. “Yes, we’re done here.” She clears her throat and stands a little taller. “I’ll… leave you to it.”

In the empty silence of her departure, Will lets go of the breath caught in his chest, hears it tremble in his throat. Returns his attention to the glint of the axe hanging over his head.

“Don’t go inside, please, Will,” Hannibal invokes, mildly, stepping over a discarded boot to meet Will in the center of his maelstrom of shed armor. “I want you here with me.”

He looks up to meet his eye and nods, brusque.

“The child you were discussing. Alana mentioned her before. Your own?”

“Abigail,” Will says, careful. Rote. “The poacher’s daughter. The one he loved and tried to kill. I took her in.”

Hannibal’s smile is warm with curiosity. “You took his place. Strange thing, to make a foundling by way of orphaning them.” He circles closer, reaches out to press his fingertips to Will’s chin and tilt it higher. “Tell me, what was she like?”

Will trembles and says sharply, “She would have reminded you of your sister.”

The barb has the intended effect on Hannibal, whose face draws closed in something near to a flinch. He nods gently, and wets his lips. The press of his fingers leaves Will’s skin, but the sensation of the touch lingers on, prickling hot. He touches the outside of Will’s arm next, the thin rip in the cloth of his tunic and the shallow line of blood already clotted and dark. Considers the wound with a low hum. The corner of his mouth twitches, and Will swallows.

There are a hundred killing tools close at hand, hung on every wall, arranged in elaborate heraldic frameworks but still kept deadly sharp. Wrought shields and plate reflecting the red glint of torchlight. He would have to break away from Hannibal to lay a hand on any of it. That leaves a wordless impasse to their position in the center of the room, locked together.

“I had thought,” he muses, as though the idea has just occurred to him. “That it was your intention to kill Clark Ingram when you faced him today. You certainly had ample opportunity.” His nostrils flare and his dark eyes search with flaying keenness. “But you let him live. Why is that?”

“I changed my mind.” Will feels his heart pound harsh and quick beneath his ribs.

“Catch and release,” Hannibal guesses. “Or cut bait?”

“He got what he deserved,” Will sneers. “Why should I bother killing him, too?”

Hannibal’s brow tilts. “I had thought you might do it for my sake,” he says, with his voice like honey and wine slick in Will’s ear. “You seemed so eager to hunt for me.” He reaches out to cup his hand against the side of Will’s face, tracing the hollow of his cheek and the ridge of his jaw. Will’s hand rises after his and clasps his wrist, not pulling away but clutching tight, near bruising.

“I realized something, out on the field,” he says, voice honed to a razor edge, “I’m done following orders. Yours, Verger’s, all of it. I don't want to be your weapon, or your goddamn *pet*.”

Hannibal’s face shutters to him again, impenetrable stone and dense, smoky shadow. There's a bottomless danger in the stillness of his expression. “So you abandon your oaths,” he says, slow and soft. “Break fealty, spurn my command. What’s to be done about that?”

Will’s eyes flicker quickly up to meet his and he digs his thumb into the underside of Hannibal’s wrist, sharp and swift. The minute the joint falters, he ducks low, catches him at the waist and shoves, twists, pulls. Lightning-fast motions unbalance the dense, sinewy weight of Lecter’s well-muscled body with sheer surprise and desperation and a little luck. Hannibal’s back hits the floor as his eyes widen, and the breath knocked out of him is a hot gust on Will’s neck. The circlet flies off his head to clatter on the stone and his hair falls askew like chaff. Will throws one leg over Hannibal’s waist to keep him grappled and bares his teeth.

What stays him before he can go for the throat is a burst of joyous laughter, warm and golden in his ear, rumbling through Hannibal’s chest where they are pressed together. The look on his face is unfortified and utterly radiant with happiness. Exultation shines bright in his eyes, pupils swelled

huge and dark. “Magnificent, Will,” he says, winded and rasping. “Look at you. Wild, unfettered thing.”

Will’s limbs lock up in shock and he feels his face twist in staggered uncomprehension, glaring down at the nobleman pinned underneath him, breathing hard. “What the hell are you playing at,” he hisses furiously.

“If you strive to spill blood, my *hertis rote*, I would not have you do it for me, nor for that piggish Verger boy. Not even for your friend Peter.” Hannibal grins wide and jagged and grasps at Will’s arms like he’s caught in an embrace and not a grapple. “Not for anyone but yourself. Do your own will and defy all the rest.”

Blackness swims in the edges of his vision and Will bears down harder, doesn't give him the chance to buck and steal his advantage. “You’d change your tune if it were your blood I wanted to spill,” he growls.

He clings tight, pressing his palm hot as a brand against the dip of Will’s waist, as close as he can reach to pulling Will against him. “Don’t you?”

The intimacy of their position is thrown into jarring relief when Will shifts his weight and feels his hips hitch, stuttering, into the soft muscle of Hannibal’s thigh. He might have been half-hard since the moment he took Lecter to the ground, but he hadn’t been fully aware of it until this one, as he catches himself biting back a groan. His face heats and his attention flickers lower to confirm that his and Hannibal’s plights are not so far removed.

“What was it that you said to me, before?” the nobleman murmurs, a flush rising in his cheeks. “*If you see something you want, I suggest you take it*, I believe it was. Or don’t you keep your own advice?”

Will plants the side of his forearm against Hannibal’s chest and bends down to stop his mouth with a hotheaded kiss, sharp edges of teeth clicking together, lips bruising with careless use. Hannibal thrusts his tongue out to taste the ridges of his palate and Will growls, biting down until he tastes copper. Hannibal falls back, panting, mouth painted bright with blood, so Will nudges his jaw up to bare the arch of his neck, finds the pink line of the scar there and runs the flat of his tongue over it, eager to taste that, too. He finds sweat and the faint acetic cleanness of soap, the leather and pine smell that clings to his skin. Arousal flares hot and aching in his gut.

“You just can’t stop testing my mettle,” Will groans. Fingers scrabble at the fastenings of his doublet, working to claw his way beneath, scrape nails over the hair that grows on Hannibal’s sternum and down his belly and watch red welts rise in the wake, see his chest rise and fall with every breath. “More trials, my Lord, is that it? Wind me up and watch me go? Are you watching closely?”

Hannibal doesn’t struggle out of the bruising grasp or put up any resistance to his explorations. Only clings tight and gazes back, eyes dark, expression sharp and covetous. He clutches at Will’s shoulders and lets out a near-silent keening hum of approval as Will bites and sucks at his collarbones, ghosts a humid breath over one dusky nipple until it pebbles. “Will,” he says, the sound more prayer than plea, and Will’s ears burn with it. “I’m not your lord.”

The rises and falls come swifter and shallower as he takes his pound of flesh, leaves blossoming marks all across Hannibal’s skin, high as the hollow of his throat. Reaches up to the tousled mess of his hair haloed out against the stone floor and takes a fistful in hand, pulls until he hears another choked-back groan. “No,” Will huffs. “Just mine.”

He has Lecter laid out in his own armory with towering racks of lances and staves and axes glinting from every wall and a look in his eyes like Will's hands are more dangerous than any of them, like his tongue is sharper and stronger and twice as keen. Caution and reason and cogent thought all struggle to a halt in the face of that look, and Will shifts his weight to firmly straddle Hannibal's lap. His hips roll, rutting against the hot, hard line of his cock, startling a wet, stuttering gasp out of him.

"Apparently this is how I go," he murmurs with a wry smirk that falls away to another shaky moan, too loud for the furtive nature of the liaison, like he wants to be caught writhing half-naked in a nobleman's lap before he's even had the satisfaction of getting his pants down. Hannibal's no help, sliding his hands down the slope of Will's waist to shamelessly grope his ass and tempt him into another luxurious grind. "F-fuck, that's – unh. Hannibal."

The color in Hannibal's face is high, cheeks flushed to startling red, and Will realizes with a dim echo of surprise that one of his palms is braced on his neck, fingers just beginning to squeeze into a proper throttling. A clutch for balance and bellicose reflex, done without conscious intent. He admires the way it looks, his knuckles framing the line of the scar on Hannibal's throat like openwork tracery. *Elegant*.

"Ah," Will says, blinking down at the lovely shape of Hannibal's mouth as he struggles for air, pressing tight and then letting go. Hannibal's wine-dark eyes are glossy, falling halfway shut in sanctified gratitude, and his next breath in whistles with the lingering strain. Will's cock throbs, straining at the laces of his breeches, and he shoves the hand he'd used to throttle down to relieve the tender ache. Squeezes the tented fabric over the head of his prick, kneads and rubs. It's hard to get himself under control long enough to pull away before he makes a mess of his clothes. He arches, one palm flat on the stone floor, straining at his shoulder, eyes flickering wildly over the shadowy shape of Hannibal below him.

"Show me." Hannibal curls grasping fingers into his sides and wets his lips, smears blood faintly across them. "Let me see you, Will."

"I have to feel you," he adjures, sharp and rough, and draws his red, leaking cock out before shifting his weight to do the same to Hannibal, let it fall heavy across his belly, fat and pleasingly curved. At a more opportune time and place he wants it inside of him again, deep enough to bruise and ache, to feel like a twisting blade in a wound. For now he accedes to sighing and pressing closer, frotting his hard length against Hannibal's, wrapping his fist around the both of them at once and feeling them pulse and shudder in mirrored satisfaction. "Oh, god," he whispers. "Just, just–"

"I love your instincts," Hannibal praises as he strokes tight and savagely hard, gasping, barely able to keep breath in his lungs. "Far beyond me to control or predict. You are your own, you are a force of nature, so fierce, you are – you are–"

"Flattery," Will huffs. The flushed head of his cock slides through his fingers, so full that it throbs in time to his racing pulse. Hannibal's is leaking steadily, easing every stroke into a tight, wet grind. "Manipulative. *Oh*, fuck, that's… more, give me more."

The sliver of skin between his shirt and his down-gyved breeches stings with the scrapes and crescent bites of Hannibal's nails, gripping bloodlessly tight. His head rolls back, jaw pulsing. "What do you need?"

Will bends forward, presses his forehead to the stretch of skin and taut muscle over Hannibal's heart, the rhythm of it reverberating through his skull. "Feel it," he breathes. "With me, Hannibal."

“Yes.” Fingers wrapping around his own, around them together. Will pants open-mouthed against his clavicle, shuts his eyes and trembles at the sweet, hot synchronicity of their bodies. Pleasure on pleasure and want on want, equal and endless. He feels his muscles lock up, hips stuttering, starting to spill in frantic pulses where they’re moving as one. Will hears Hannibal’s wanton groan in his ear, realizes that it was not *his* peak he felt cresting and immediately peaks again, all his own. Spend slides through his fingers, drips onto Hannibal’s belly, pools in his palm to slick him as he fucks through it. It feels like coming apart at the seams, like a wave breaking on a cliff, and it goes on forever, so long he feels undone by it.

He comes to himself clinging tight to Hannibal, slumped over his chest. There’s a hitch to his breathing that won’t settle even as his pulse slows from a gallop to a canter. Will buries his face in the rich, soft wool of Hannibal’s unbuckled doublet to smother a few shaky gasps, eyes stinging. Furrows his brow when he sees that he’s left the wool tear-dampened and furrows it deeper when another sob seizes his lungs unbidden.

Hannibal’s hand rises to rest between his shoulderblades, moves in a soothing arc. “Will,” he murmurs low and rumbling. “Easy, dear heart. I have you.”

Will shakes his head, trying to quell the force of mind and circumstance shuddering through him or deny it outright, but it takes long seconds to catch his breath, to blink away the glassy sheen in his eyes. To shift upright onto his elbows, rest his cheek in the hollow of Hannibal’s shoulder and lock the feeling away as deep as he can bury it. “That tunic might be beyond hope,” he huffs, rasping. Sweat and blood and come mar the fine white cotton, the way everything Will touches leaves a mark and especially the things he loves. “Uncouth. I seem to have made a mess of you.”

“The fault is shared,” he notes, nosing at Will’s temple, inhaling softly and brushing his lips against the damp curls. “No matter. I’ll do without, hm?”

He angles for a kiss and Will sinks into it, still numb in the wake of the cataclysm he’s pushed aside. Feels swelling sadness stir again as soft lips press into his own, a squeezing pressure at his lungs, a yawning hole in the floor of his mind. He skirts the chasm, turns his back to it, grips Hannibal by the jaw and kisses him slow and firm.

Hannibal rises from supine on the stone floor with some effort expended to shake the stiffness from his spine and peels the stained garment off his back. He turns a taciturn sliver of a grin on Will as he begins the arduous process of making himself halfway presentable, bending to retrieve the circlet that had been knocked from his head.

Will’s eyes trace over the new expanse of bare skin with mercenary eyes, cataloging every shift of muscle and ridge of bone, every spare freckle and identifying mark. He drinks it in to hold all of it in his memory, because at this moment he wants the knowledge like air. Because memory is the only place he will soon be able to have him. His eyes catch at the thin ridge of a scar in the valley between Hannibal’s shoulderblades, small and white, and tear away at the moment he realizes the source. Abigail’s knife, piercing armor just deep enough to be remembered by. He shuts his eyes and wishes desperately to unsee it.

“Are you well, Will?” Hannibal casts him an idly curious look over his shoulder and refastens his doublet. The scar slides out of view.

Will nods, a little terse with the tight feeling knotted in the pit of his stomach. He turns away to the discarded armor strewn over the floor. “Well-used,” he excuses. “You’ve emptied me out. I feel hollow.”

Hannibal finishes the last buckle of his doublet with an approving chuckle. The edges of some of Will's biting marks show at the collar. He wears them like jewels. "Rest, then. You've bested enough trials for one morning, I think." Hannibal settles the circlet on his brow and his dishabille is hidden as well as can be. Well enough to survive the return to his solar. Will looks ripe for gossip, but he's rarely in any more of a fit state to be seen in court to begin with and that deficiency of character hasn't managed to put Hannibal off as yet. There's still time, Will supposes. But a little less and less of it every minute.

"Hannibal," he calls, delaying him at the threshold. "I'll see you at dinner?"

Lips quirk up into a grin, wide enough for a flash of teeth. "Dear Will," he chimes happily. "Nothing would please me more."

※

The race to outrun the storm brewing in his head lasts only as long as the first step he takes into his chamber in the barracks. Abigail is already waiting for him there, sitting with her back against the headboard and busily hafting an arrowhead with a goading glint in her eye. Her cheek is painted in the frantic pulsing splatters of her heart's blood. She glances up at him, an impudent curve to her thin mouth, and announces, "You're in love with him, aren't you?"

"Don't know what you're talking about," Will gainsays, discarding his leathers in a shoddy pile, throat working.

"You *are*," she crows triumphantly, sitting up straighter. "Don't lie. It's okay, you know. I'm not going to disapprove or anything. I like him."

Will's knees buckle and he sits on the edge of the bed, jaw tight. The whole world wavers dangerously in the corners of his vision, tilting steeply to the side. "God," he chokes. "Don't – don't say that."

"I like him," she echoes stubbornly, and tests the point of the arrowhead against the pad of her thumb. Sucks up the drop of blood that bubbles out. "So do you. Why not admit it?"

"You don't know what he is," Will says thickly.

"A murderer?"

Will's eyes shut and he feels the tacky, gritty crimson of blood on his skin. "Among other things."

Her eyes pinch at the corners in amusement, glinting like firelight. "I mean it. I really would," she expounds thoughtfully, "In some other world. If I got to know him. We'd get along. Hunt together. He'd teach me to play the dulcimer."

"Raise snails in the garden," he adjoins in a strained murmur. "Make the sky glow with fireflies every night."

Abigail's smile is a palpable thing. He can feel it pull at the strings of his heart, tug them in two directions at once with a sharp wrenching pain. "He'd be a good father."

Will's throat closes over and his breaths come thin and sparse like his ribs are constricting around the soft organs they're meant to protect. "You want me to – to stay with him after everything he's done?"

he accuses with a quiet agony. “Just ignore the worst in him. Put it all aside and play along so I can continue enjoying the best. Be blind.”

“You like the worst in him,” she refutes, “Just as much as anything else. That’s how love works, isn’t it? It’s sort of an all or nothing proposition.”

“That’s enough,” Will hisses sharply in warning.

He turns a baleful, ashen glare on her, watches light and color waver, watches her blood-spattered face shrink back in the face of his miserable wrath. But she rallies a moment later, blue eyes flashing, lip jutting out in a stiff, stubborn line. “You’re being an ass, you know that? Just because you want to pretend it’s not true, that doesn’t make you right!”

“I said that’s *enough*, Abigail!”

She flinches, jaw trembling. Dimly he registers the fear in her countenance, pulled directly from the memory of their first meeting, pleading and trembling with her father’s hands around her neck.

“I think you should go now,” he says with a terse grit of his teeth.

Her face pulls inward with disappointed hurt and he feels a black pit of regret pooling in his stomach. She pulls back, turns and bleeds away into so much empty air, bolting like a startled hind and vanishing between one blink of his eyes and the next.

Will stares at the chasm she left behind, breathing sharp and shallow, and reaches up to feel out the hollow of his throat.

He cut away the collar around his neck earlier, but its absence only reveals the other tether that has grown unchecked. *Love*. A snare he stepped into of his own accord, never knowing how thick and fast it would grow in around him. Well, he’s caught in it now. Wound helplessly into his own snare. Bound up in brambles, tangled and barbed in thorns that pierce through his paper-thin skin and wind tight around his heart. So close that separation is death.

But there’s no true freedom unless he puts a stop to this. Unless he finds the suckering root of the briar and cuts it out by force.

Will swallows and slowly leans over to pick up her knife where it was lying, forgotten, on the bedside table. Buckles it to his belt and shuts the door behind him with an audible, echoing thud.

He slips away through shadows and dim corners, and every eye that turns his way flickers past him without seeing. Clarity of purpose helps him stride through every gate without impediment, unnoticed, undisturbed, stealing silently out of Ravenstag until he reaches the distant wattle and daub face of the half-rotted empty stable on the northern road, pushes open one hanging oak door, and strides in one pace, two paces, three. “Buongiorno,” he grunts to the armed men standing inside.

They step aside to let him pass and Will sinks smoothly to one knee in the muddy straw, his head bent low.

“Buongiorno,” Mason Verger trills right back, with an exuberant, vicious smile splitting his face wide open.

Chapter End Notes

ah characters who backslide my beloveds....my beloatheds.....you are making this so fucking difficult and narratively compelling

GOD I just knew I couldn't get all the way through the concept of this fic without letting Hannibal drop a 'myne owne hertis rote', as in the middle english "heart's root", indicating the deepest and innermost part of your heart, like the root of a plant. Hope you all go as unhinged for that historical term of endearment as I did because holy fuck

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

HEY so I kicked my ass back into gear you're WELCOME. on track to give you a reasonable weekly update! I love that for me and for us.

content warnings: violence and threats of violence, explicit sexual content, Mason is also here so he's gonna be the way that he is, and I will say there's a definite shade of sexual harassment to his attitude here

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You had me *worried* for a while there, Will," Lord Verger sighs as he steps forward to furrow ring-studded fingers through Will's hair. He clasps him by the jaw to tilt his face up. "Thought you might not show. Started to wonder if you might have gotten a little hazy on who you work for. You haven't, have you?"

Verger's touch makes Will's skin crawl the same way it always has, prickles of gooseflesh raising on the backs of his arms, stomach curdling in raw disgust. Made worse by going so long without having to bear it. "Would I be here if I had, my Lord?"

A shadow flickers over Mason's face. "I have always hated," he shifts his grasping hand and tugs sharply at Will's hair, tuts. "Your habit of answering back with questions. When I ask you to jump I'm not looking for a *how high, my Lord*?" His voice trebles into a mocking falsetto and then flattens out again. "I just want to see you jump."

Will swallows the sour gall of indignity, eyes fixed on the molding straw mashed into the mud under his bent knees. "I work for you. I haven't forgotten."

"Good," Verger hums. "Good. You really settled in, hm? Something in the air here agrees with you, I think, you're all flushed. Maybe it's just the chill, I don't know. You’re always so chilly, Will." When Will makes no reply but to grind his teeth and wait in anticipatory silence, he rolls his eyes, releases his grip and pats the crown of his head. “God, you're a bad-tempered little mongrel. Something we should work on.”

Replies gather under Will’s tongue, sweet like old blood, but to let them slide off would upset the balance of power. He bites them all back and gives Lord Verger his silence and his bent neck.

In the corner of his eye he finds Jack standing at attention amid the mercenaries, something uneasy in the set of his mouth, seeking Will out with short, sharp darting glances that warn of turbulent water ahead. Will’s eyes flicker his way and he nods, having expected nothing less.

Pigskin boots kick aside the wet straw to pace a meandering circle around Will. “Still, I bet Lecter likes it when you answer back. Does it amuse him?” Mason leers. “Excite him, maybe? Does he enjoy fucking with you? Or just fucking you?” Will doesn’t track the footsteps when they leave his line of sight, so it jolts him unpleasantly to feel one boot snap out after a beat and prod him sharply in the meat of his thigh. “I hear all kinds of fascinating rumors.”

Will wets his lips, keeps his inflection low and flat. “Lord Lecter trusts me.”

“I’ll just bet he does,” Mason scoffs, his fingers tugging at the collar of Will’s tunic, examining until he finds a red bruise a few days faded. “Enough to keep his cock warm in your mouth without worrying you might get feisty and try to bite it off. I wouldn’t chance it, myself. Lie down with dogs and wake up with fleas. Ha!” He lets out a giddy chuckle at his own cleverness and then there’s a hand coming down to brace against each of Will’s shoulders, the lord himself leaning close enough to smell the warm waft of claret on his breath. “But we’re not here to bandy about what it is you do to keep Lecter happy. I want to know what you can do for me now. I want my castle, Will. I want my title.” His voice goes thin and whining, an audible pout to his mouth where it’s hovering close behind Will’s ear.

“And you’ll get it,” Will vows.

Verger huffs. “Ah, but *when*? Don’t tease me now, I couldn’t bear it.”

“There’s a tunnel,” he explains, something in his gut sinking low and heavy as lead. “A hidden passage that runs from the foothills straight into the heart of the keep. Lecter built it for escape in a siege, but with a man on the inside to open the door you could smuggle an army in and take the hold before the guards have a chance to sound the warning bell.”

“Well,” comes the reply. The news is received with a thoughtful clench of his fingers, dragging harsh against his collar. “Well! Glad to know you haven’t been spending all your time at Ravenstag flat on your back.” He grips tighter, tugs Will back against his chest to press his lips to the crown of his head, laving a coarse kiss against his curls, and releases him, tossing him away like swill. “You have a real hidden talent for treason, Will, you know that? I’m impressed.”

Will hears the dark amusement curling through his snide voice like smoke and swallows down a shudder. He keeps his face turned straight ahead. It’s a painful but necessary course of action to bend his knee and muzzle himself and sell Verger that he can be a good dog long enough to get what he needs from the nobleman, and after that–

After that, it doesn’t matter.

“And what about Lecter?” Jack chips in, “A few guards, my people can handle, but how do we deal with the Vulture himself? We need to keep him distracted while his castle’s being infiltrated.”

Will casts a sharp-eyed glance to the side to meet his gaze head-on and knows that there must be something wolfish showing in the black chasms of his pupils. Jack’s eyes narrow when he sees it. “Oh, I’ll take care of Lecter,” he promises, in a voice gone as flat as honed steel.

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“Please,” he groans, high and rough, because he knows the word will make heat flare in Hannibal’s face and because he means it, too, bending like clay and taking the force of every slow thrust with one long, hoarse moan that spills out of his chest in watery rivulets. “Please, please–”

Above him Hannibal’s jaw pulses with the effort of keeping himself silent, striving to drink in every echo of the sound without interruption. His hand presses Will’s thigh down nearly flush against his belly to hold him bare and open, sinking deep with a leisurely rock of his hips. It must be a good view, Will thinks, the sight of his legs spread wide and his hole red and dripping oil, clenching tight around him. He’s done his part to savor it a long while already, opening him with relentless stretching and stroking fingers, teasing in a third and then a fourth when Will had already resorted to cursing and

pleading for his cock. Grinning like a fiend and humming whimsically at every plea, as if they had all the time in the world to go about this act, lingering so long the fire is burning low and cherry red in the grate.

Will pleads, ceding to the hungry demands of his body to have the pleasure stoked higher and harder, but he likes this resistance, too, and truly he doesn't plead too forcefully. Wants a little to draw the game out forever, to sink inside the feeling until everything outside of it turns to smoke and shadow. Hannibal's hand reaches for his prick, caresses the shaft with an idle stroke of his thumb that makes him shiver, but Will shakes his head, grasps for Hannibal's wrist and drags his hand away until it rests instead over the soft meat of his stomach, palm flat against the twisting white line of scar tissue on his abdomen. As good as offering it up to him for the taking.

"*Oh*," he exhales shakily and shuts his eyes. Hannibal's hand is hot as a brand against his skin, all at once soft with gentle use and rough with old callouses. Where the Verger mark dulls all feeling like ice over a lake, this ribbon of mauled tissue is a living thing, alight with tangled nerves, like holding lightning in his belly. It feels open and inflamed under Hannibal's touch and Will breathes in sharply through his nose at the absurd anxiety of getting blood on his hands. He squeezes his wrist tighter. "God, Hannibal, don't stop, don't–"

A harsh growl of sound finally breaks through his self-imposed barrier of silence, and Hannibal bends forward, driving his cock deeper into Will and bearing him down into the mattress, hair falling askew across his face, breath hot against the hollow of his throat. So close that they could be mistaken for one being, some monstrous amalgam of limbs and twisting antlers and teeth, grotesque and wild.

"I wish," Hannibal snarls, face pressed to the side of his neck, "That I could sink my teeth into your living heart." His hips snap sharply against the back of Will's thighs, bruisingly hard. "Taste your blood at the very fountain of its source."

A hoarse, strangled shout tears from Will's lips and he throws his head to the side, clutches Hannibal close every way that he can, hoisting his bent legs around his waist to dig in his heels. "Never say never."

"*Will*." A dangerous rumble darkens Hannibal's tone. He groans, curls in close and bites harshly at the rampant boar on his sternum, marking the thick, scarred skin until the Verger seal is ringed in the stark impressions of his teeth. Overlaying the claim. Even with the feeling dulled the pain is sharp and sudden and hot, but while he's being fucked halfway senseless Will can hardly summon a breath to protest.

He clasps at the back of Hannibal's head with his free hand, fingers twining in his hair, petting him encouragingly while he savages dark jealous bruises over the seal engraved in his skin. He stares down at his face in profile and flickering shadow, the silhouette of bared teeth and half-lidded eyes, and feels a pang of anguish from his traitorous heart at the anticipation of loss. He feels *unraveled* with wanting.

Will moans, and hitches his hips up to work himself back onto Hannibal's cock, makes a quiet noise in the back of his throat as he feels himself shiver and spill untouched. He tenses around the thick, hot length splitting him open, hears Hannibal's answering groan as his thrusts go stuttering and sharp, Will's body avariciously siphoning all the pleasure out of him.

Will takes it, takes all he can, and then it's over.

It's hard not to cling and try to keep him inside, keep him close. Even as Hannibal presses a kiss to his bruised sternum and pulls away for breath Will resents that they can survive the separation.

“You said you had something to ask of me when you came to me in my chambers,” he murmurs, far too soon. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten.”

Will affixes a mordant ghost of a smile, tilting his face up toward the rich velvet drapings of the canopy bed gathered overhead. “Maybe all my wants have been satisfied already.”

“Is that so?” Hannibal presses more open-mouthed kisses across the plane of Will’s chest, the sparse hair and cooling sweat. “Then you don’t intend to petition me for half of my kingdom, after all? And here I was prepared to go to any lengths to see my Will’s wants assuaged.” He glances up to Will’s face, and his brow twitches up in ironic challenge.

Will feels thick despair catch in his chest, and a vicious thrill of joy, too, torn in two directions at once. The smile falters and he reaches up to touch the side of Hannibal’s face, trace the sharp line of his cheek. “There is… something you could do for me,” he breathes.

Hannibal leans into the press of his hand and his eyes dance with intrigue, adoration, and kindling excitement.

“Invite Mason Verger here to Ravenstag,” Will proposes. Somehow his voice doesn’t waver, taken over with an eerie calm. “Throw a feast. Wine and dine him. Make him feel *welcome*.”

The Vulture cranes his head, keen with the anticipation of spilled blood on the wind. “And after that?”

“After that,” Will finishes, running his fingers idly through Hannibal’s hair. “You and I are going to kill him.”

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Will doesn’t watch the entourage arrive, but he hears the bustle from the courtyard with every window he passes like the low tremble of a gathering storm. The distant strain of Lord Verger’s laughter wafts upward on the wind, bright and sour.

He squares his shoulders and forces the lock with a harsh, silent grunt. Examines the shelves of decoctions and poultices, takes what he needs from the shelves. Will slips the bottle up his sleeve and turns on his heel to collide directly into the court physician.

Doctor Gideon blinks and steps back, brow furrowing as he looks Will over in surprise, then suspicion, and then thinly veiled intrigue. Will’s expression stays immutable as stone.

“You wouldn’t be stealing from my stores, would you, Mister Graham?”

Deep in the rhythm of his work, the fear of being caught feels blurred and distant. Unimportant so long as the job gets done. He lifts his hands and falls into a contrite shrug, caught out. Gideon whistles lowly to himself, reaches behind his back and slides the bolt on the door shut again.

“Might I ask what for?”

Will’s smile is thin and wolfish. “Wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise.”

Gideon laughs, still placed between Will and his exit, eyes creased in genuine entertainment. “Really have to admire the brass balls on you.” He waltzes over toward his table, adjusts a few bottles, nudges a pestle to the opposite side of a mortar, still glancing speculatively back at him. “You’re very confident. Still, I imagine you’re doing whatever it is you’re doing with Lord Lecter’s blessing,” he guesses. “Or perhaps not.”

Will hums, noncommittal, and tilts his head, turning his own curious look on the doctor. “You used to work for Lord Chilton,” he says, then qualifies, “Back when there was a Lord Chilton. Didn’t you?”

A pang of disquiet flashes across Gideon’s face at the name and he turns back to face Will fully, waiting for an elaboration.

Will huffs a dry laugh and waves one hand dismissively. “I was a forester in Wolf Trap, a while back. Reported to Chilton, technically, if I ever ventured out of the king’s wood long enough. I thought you looked familiar. I remember you, standing at his right hand, managing his ill health. How *did* you convince Lord Hannibal to take you on?”

His steely eyes narrow and his bearded face twitches up in a ghost of amusement. “I took a knife to dear Lord Frederick’s back while the massive army knocked down the door. Opened him up and sliced out the kidneys. And the sweetbreads. Made a gift basket. Show of good faith toward the change in management.” He inclines his head in a proud, conspiratorial little half-bow. “Chilton was a pompous windbag. It wasn’t exactly a hardship to poke a deep enough hole in him to let all the air out.”

Will nods, leaning back against the table, still peering sideways at him, face neutral. Doctor Gideon clicks his tongue, weighing and calculating.

“Loyalty is more or less *contextual*, isn’t it, Mister Graham, for men like us. Can’t define ourselves by who we’re sworn to, live and die in their names. Big fish eat the little fish, and then a bigger, meaner fish comes along and gobbles *that* fish up. We just do what we can to keep our heads above the water.” His eyes flash to the window on the far side of the room, directing a glance in the direction of the distant courtyard. “Two very big fish out there right now. Makes you wonder who is going to be eating who come morning.”

“Are you accusing me of something, Doctor?”

“Oh, no, no, far be it from me to throw around any *accusations*,” Gideon says, just slightly gleeful. He seats himself primly at his table, back to Will and the bolted door, and seems to come to a conclusion. Waves one hand, absentmindedly. “Go on, now, let me get back to my work and you get back to yours, Mister Graham.”

Will shakes his head and unbolts the door as Doctor Gideon starts whistling a jaunty fragment of an old song to himself. After a moment, though, his handiwork falters again. “Wolf Trap,” Gideon murmurs, pensive. “Wouldn’t happen to be the name of one of those unfortunate little hamlets that burnt to the ground along the march to Frederick’s front door, would it?”

Blood and smoke thick in the air. Screams and ringing steel and crackling wood. “Down to ashes,” Will hums in answer.

Gideon nods slowly and his smile quirks in a mirror of Will’s own, bitter-tinged and crooked to one side. “Lucky you made it out alive, then.”

A dry laugh rasps off his tongue. “More or less.” Will steps back into the shadows of the hall and draws the bolt across the door again from the outside. He goes back to his work.

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“What’s this?” Bev asks slyly when Will stops at her post and passes over the wineskin. “You’ll be late for dinner,” she chides as she uncorks it, then blinks in surprise, eyes going briefly wider. “Hold

on, this is the good stuff, isn't it? You're not going to get in trouble, raiding Lord Lecter's personal cellar to spoil us?"

Will laughs under his breath and ducks his head. "Consider it repayment," he justifies, "For all the help you've given me."

"Yeah, don't be ungrateful, Bev, give it here," Price snatches the flask from her hands and throws back a hasty swig.

"Hey!" Zeller elbows him, tears the wineskin from his hands as he coughs in protest. "Save some for the rest of us, you lush."

Beverly rolls her eyes, lets them squabble it out and reaches out to rest her hand on Will's arm, over the curve of his vambrace. "Alright," she says, with a fond, chastising squeeze of pressure. "Well. I'll make sure to savor it." A hint of a frown pinches between her brows. "So long as this isn't some kind of stealthy parting gift you're trying to slip past me."

"Nothing slips past you," Will assuages, with a white flash of a grin.

She claps him on the shoulder and then lets go, taking the wine back from Zeller to throw back a long, eager draught and wipe her mouth on the sleeve of her gambeson. "Damn straight," she agrees, eyes bright.

Will glances past her over the edge of the ramparts, the lights of the lower town and the drawing nightfall blanketing over the valley beyond, miles and miles swallowed up by cotton-wool dark, the wide sky above their heads hanging heavy with gathering clouds. The calm before the storm.

"Lounds!" Price cheers, lifting the borrowed flask overhead. Will turns on his heel to see the court spymaster with her shock of scarlet hair and her keen, piercing smile. He feels a twist in the pit of his stomach, like stepping down on an unsteady cobble and feeling it shift underfoot. "Get over here and have a drink with us!"

Her eyes seek out Will's, unflinching, bright and cold, as she tilts her smile over the rest of the guard. "Can't, I'm afraid, I'm on duty," she says, and then, as if the thought has just occurred to her, "Actually, I needed to speak to Mister Graham a moment. If you wouldn't mind."

Will's head inclines into a slow nod that reels toward a mocking bow and he follows her around the corner into the silent shadows of the west wall. He stops short when he sees the other figure waiting there, white-faced and emerging like a moth from the dark.

"Alana–" he starts, as he hears the click of a bolt slotting into a crossbow. Turns with his hands already hovering in the air and stares daggers at Freddie Lounds along the sight of her loaded weapon.

"Let's talk, Will," she chirps. The point of her bolt is aimed between his eyes. Will exhales, slow and steady.

"I'm all ears."

She steps forward, keeps the crossbow leveled with an impressively steady aim. "I had questions," she starts, "After your miraculous rescue at the tourney. The knight in stolen armor routine. There was a seal on that armor I could have sworn I'd seen somewhere before."

Will smiles, thin and serrated with teeth. "You left to investigate me."

“The Pazzi family crest,” Freddie blows on with a slight snarl to her lip. “I left for information on *Sir Pazzi*. And found he had just turned up dead, not two days ride east of here.”

Will’s brows tilt up in concern. “Really.”

“Don’t interrupt me again, please,” she says, with a purposeful glint in her eye. “Do you know who killed Rinaldo Pazzi, Mister Graham? I do. It was a man who works for the Vergers.” Will looks between the spymaster and Alana, sees her lips press in a thin, tremulous line as she listens, hands folded in her gown. “They call him Mason’s *Mad Dog*. More or less a legend in mercenary circles. He’s a walking shade, never tires, always gets his quarry. Plenty of rumors say he works some kind of dark magic; I think it’s much more likely that he’s simply a violent, disturbed man who makes a living out of killing because he enjoys it.”

The thunder rolls low and deep overhead, signaling the oncoming storm. Will glances up at the shifting greenish pallor of the black sky and feels fury pulse in his jaw. Alana’s eyes skate away from his when he looks to her again. Her face is white as a sheet.

Freddie tilts her chin higher. “But you know that. You’re a mercenary yourself. Still, it’s strange, right? That the spoils of that murder would end up in your possession.” She grins, and it isn’t a kind grin at all. “Unless it was you.” The crossbow nudges closer, suggestively sharp. “Now, you can go ahead and reply, Mister Graham.”

Will tilts his head at her and lowers his hands by slow degrees. “When you told Lord Lecter of your findings,” he leads, “What did he say?”

A flicker of annoyance ripples through her heart-shaped face. “Lord Lecter is under the impression that you are his man through and through. He has a blind spot.”

“He sees the best in you,” Alana interjects, with a brittle edge to her voice. “Freddie is a more objective observer.”

Will laughs at that, soft and thin. “None of us really ever know each other,” he dissents with a quick jerking shake of his head. “Or ourselves. Not completely. We are too malleable to be pinned down by the truth.” He looks between them and sets his teeth on edge. “You will have to take Lord Hannibal’s word for it that I am exactly who I claim to be. Whatever I did before, I have *evolved*.”

Alana hisses out a quiet, terse breath between her teeth and her eyes flicker over Will’s face in disquietude. “Will,” she says in the same harsh, desperate cadence she used in their last conversation, needing to trust him while fearing that she can’t. “Why is Lord Verger here?”

“Hannibal finds him rude,” he offers up as a pale echo of an explanation.

“Relieving him of his duties?” Lounds asks sharply. “After bringing him to Ravenstag as a guest? That’s risky politics.”

“Mason’s not exactly well-loved,” Will answers with a snide glance. “A little bit feared, loathed much more than that. Lady Margot can do anything that he can. And with a gentler touch.”

The crossbow wavers a little lower, not because Lounds is much less willing to let the bolt loose but because the machinery is too heavy to keep on a steady course. Will watches the faltering tremor of her shoulder like a hawk.

Over Alana's shoulder, lightning flashes against the sky, in the clouds hanging low over the foothills, and lights up her silhouette for a moment in white gold. "I don't know what to believe," she murmurs in a shaky whisper. "Are you working with Hannibal or are you plotting against him?"

Will steps closer to her, glancing sidelong at Freddie as he moves, watching her freeze and then clench her jaw, waiting to see what will happen. He holds out his hands palm-up and waits to let her reach back, faltering, to rest her pale, slender hands on top of them, chilled by the wind. "Believe me," he says softly, saturating his face in every ounce of love that ever burned in him for her. "Trust me. You *know* me, Alana."

Will leans close and his lips curve in a gentle flicker of a smile, too thin to show his teeth. Her eyes soften while she stares up at him, face wide and bright and close to hopeful, and gradually a little of the fear falls away. She relaxes her shoulders. Only for a fraction of a second, but that's all it takes.

Will lets the smile drop away and pushes her over the balustrade.

The crossbow bolt releases with a sharp snap of string, the trajectory of the shot thrown off by complacency and shock. Will can all but entirely dodge it now, knowing to expect it, rolling to the side. It still stings along the shell of his ear, a fiery heat that he knows means spilled blood, but he recoups and lunges for Freddie quicker than she can begin to reload the weapon.

The air rings with a sharp, horrified scream from Lounds. Somewhere in the sound there must be the echo of Alana striking the stones thirty feet below, but Will scarcely hears it. He hears his own breath in his ears, ragged and harsh as a wild beast. He growls, grabs the spymaster by a fistful of her red hair and bashes her head into the low stone wall, sees her crumple and go still. The whole fight is over in an instant, the span it takes for the first raindrops to hit the ground.

Will straightens and touches his fingertips to the torn edge of his ear. Smells bitter copper and the scent of the gathering storm as air, earth, and water all tear apart and spill into one another. No sound but the approaching thunder, like war drums, like the sky's death rattle.

He walks back around the corner, past the trio of guards slumped over where he left them, dregs of drugged wine spilled at their feet. He walks ahead of the storm, ushering it along in his wake.

Chapter End Notes

let me know what part of this chapter made you the most furious with me and whether you think I can do it again but worse next time :)) you're welcome XOXO

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

content warnings: death and violence and mason verger is here too YOU know the drill

posting this chapter is the equivalent of casting an evil spell on all of you so I wish you all joy of that! enjoy your hex! I know I did

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Jack emerges from the cavern of the passage behind the arras, grim and purposeful, he is followed by a force comprising – to Will's memory – nearly every guard and sellsword in a hundred leagues of Muskrat Farm, though there must be a score more who traveled even farther than that. Mason, as usual, spared no expense.

The hall behind Will yawns wide and empty, the patrolling guards dealt with as he made his way down to the tapestry and the courtiers and servants preoccupied with the attendance of the feast. Preparations here, he gathers, were the work of another small army. Hannibal spared no expense either, delighted by an opportunity to plunder the winter stores and kill the fatted calf, to make a magnificent grand gesture of his gift to Will. If he were not an obligate host, Will knows he would have preferred to take command of the kitchens and see the whole banquet crafted by his own hands. Will regrets his inability to summon up the appetite for one bite of it.

"Will," Jack says with a sharpness to his tone that indicates it isn't his first repetition. His hand lands heavy on Will's shoulder. "Where is your head at?"

"I'm here," he answers, voice coming out flat and dull. Can't make himself turn his head far enough to meet his eyes, settling for a quick flicker of a sideways glance. "Right here, Jack."

"I need you with me," Crawford urges, low and insistent, squeezing at his upper arm, fingertips pressing over the jagged scar of the wolf's teeth, "We do this together, right? All or nothing. I'll cover you, but you gotta stay on target, Will. We're close. We are *this* close."

"I–" Will swallows his heart and lets it sink heavy to the pit of his stomach, lost in the pattern of the weave in the tapestry before him, little threads unspooling in an endless twisting labyrinth. "Yeah. Maybe too close," he mutters, a hoarse, wretched confession.

Jack's brow furrows and his hand tightens before it drops away again. "Around the west side and block off the far exit to the great hall, go!" he barks at a contingent of the men be brought along. "You take the gatehouse, keep the perimeter secure, you three check the upper floors, report back when you're done."

The others clear out and he turns back again, hoards Will into a shadowed corner with a sweep of one arm and ducks in, boxing him in to the wall and leaning close, eyes dark and somber. "We'll finish this tonight," he says sternly, "We pay the Vulture back for what he took. And then I need you to *go*. Slip away, get out, lay low for a while, you understand me?"

"Why?" Will squints up at him, wrong-footed by the sudden urgency, "Leave? Jack, what?"

He shakes his head. “Do you understand me?” When Will only stares back, dumb and nonplussed, he groans a frustrated, “*Will*.”

“Alright, yes,” he huffs, exasperated. “Yeah. Slip away, Jack, fine. I’ll do it. Gonna tell me what this is about?”

Jack nods, appeased. “Come on. Lets get you to the feast,” he brushes off, square line of his jaw clenching tight, and doesn’t say another word.

Will mutters quiet curses to himself under his breath and tries to put together enough of a coordinated front to keep one foot moving in front of the other. Each footfall carries him one heartbeat closer to the crescendo of the rolling thunder shaking apart the sky. The arching stone walls hung with ornate trimmings and mosaic and dagged cloth flicker in shadow and smoke, superimposed in his mind’s eye with the twining branches of the forest. He hears the howling of the wind, the crack of twigs underfoot, the rushing roar of the stream like a foaming flood of spilled blood.

The doors to the great hall loom before him. Will looks to Jack, who stands back, stepping to the side with a nod. Mason’s orders echo distantly in his head.

“Big gamble, this plan of yours. What makes you think,” he sneers, “That Lecter won’t just slip me a poisoned cup the second I sit down at his table, hm?”
Kneeling in the straw before him, Will doesn’t smile, but the bitter grimace on his face carries a serrated edge of amusement. “He wouldn’t do that to the food.”
Verger makes a face like his stomach is turning over, dark with annoyance, like he’ll remember the snide comment later and take it out on Will’s hide.

The air is alive with the flickering light of a hundred candles, the room packed full almost to bursting. Lord Verger is lounging at Hannibal’s left side, goblet in hand, an ostentatious ermine fur draped over his shoulders. His gray eyes meander slowly in Will’s direction as he slips silently through the throng and fix on him for an instant, pale and cold. The tables are stacked high with candied fruits and nuts, pastries, pies, fish in aspic, the smell of roasted meat heavy and rich in the air. There are more decorative touches, too, intricate centerpieces of ivy and dried flowers and polished bones, though the one staged directly in front of Mason is the most elaborate.

“He’ll serve boar,” Will predicts. “Probably make a heavy-handed joke comparing you to the meat. Won’t be able to resist the irony. He will anticipate killing you right there at the table, after finishing the main course.”
Lord Verger grinds the heel of his boot into the dirt and grits his teeth. “Not a very compelling argument for allowing you to make bait out of me. I need a little more convincing than that.”
Will licks his lips. “Lecter won’t do it before I arrive,” he promises. “He will wait for my signal.”

The head table is hanging heavy with a the weight of the whole roast boar, flesh burnished bronze and tusks rampant, clenching a wine-soaked apple in its mouth. Hannibal, seated in his high-backed oak chair, has a ravenous smile glowing dark and hot in his eyes. He follows the arc of Mason’s look to

Will and the smile grows to touch the corners of his lips. Will steps behind a column, not meeting the look, eyes still tracing fitfully around the edges of the room.

"And my signal?" Verger goes very dangerously still, midway through another pacing circumference of Will's kneeling form. "Don't you think I should get a signal, too? A little show of fealty, so I know you haven't gone and changed your mind on me? This Servant-Of-Two-Masters routine is all very comical, but I want my reassurance."
Will exhales in quiet exasperation, but keeps his expression impassive as he can. "As you say, my Lord."
He glances up again and finds that Mason looks pleased, suddenly, far too pleased for the simpering angle of his smile to do anything but send a frisson of anxiety down Will's spine. "Good! Good. I have just the thing in mind."

Will crosses behind the colonnade and out, finally reaching the velvet-curtained space behind the high table, a proscenium of draping cloth and antlers. He steps closer, approaching the chair at Lord Lecter's right hand, equal and opposite to Verger. Left empty for him, appointed as though the place of honor should be his by right.

"Will," Hannibal says in his velvet, fever-warm voice, the voice that Will has begun to hear in his own head, speaking his thoughts. It runs in his veins like lifeblood. "It's good to see you here."

"Ah, the infamous Will Graham. A little late, isn't he?" Mason hums and adds, snidely. "We couldn't start without you."

"Better late than never," Hannibal demurs, decorous and lordly, holding court. "We will none of us go hungry tonight. Come, sit, Will." His eyes flicker back to Will and go a little blank in perplexity. "I hope it was nothing serious that delayed you."

"I want you," Mason Verger croons, poisonously, "To wait until my men lock the doors behind you. Then show me my signal. Just like this." He leans in close and demonstrates the motion he means to have Will copy. Will's throat works, eyes squeezing shut as he fights the urge to tear his face away. Mason's smile goes sharp and cruel, knowing he's finally managed to strike a nerve. "And Will? I want to be clear about this. Do it to Lecter. Give him something nice to remember you by before he dies."

"I'm – sorry," Will says, knowing the apology comes out in a strained croak. He clutches white-knuckled at the back of the seat, moving like a man half in a trance. "Something came up. I took care of it."

He watches Hannibal's keen eyes seek out and find the notch chipped out of the shell of his right ear, still feebly dripping blood down the side of his neck. Recognition bleeds into his face as it goes still like a lake freezing to ice. There is a moment of absolute silence and clarity. Will stands before him and knows that Hannibal understands what is about to happen without a sound or a word. His eyes are distant and flat as coins before the glass of them cracks open to show a deep, pulsating wound, cavernous, dark and cold.

Echoing as if from a great distance, Will hears the click of the lock. He lets go of the seat and steps closer to Hannibal. Bends down. Shuts his eyes and presses a soft, close-mouthed kiss to his lips that feels like stabbing himself through the heart.

He straightens again and steps back. For a moment Mason does nothing but grin lasciviously against the rim of his cup, then he sets it down in front of his trencher, thrusts his fingers into his mouth, and whistles high and piercing.

With a ringing hum of steel, the whole hall erupts into chaos. Bolts fire, chairs and tables upend, screams and shouts rattle like thunder in the air as the whole Verger entourage turn on the assembled attendants, surrounding them and cutting them down like lambs at the slaughter. One man takes a torch to the hanging tapestries, flames licking at the embroidered thread of the Lecter seal.

Hannibal's eyes are wide and dark, his mouth still a little slack with the burning impression of Will's poison kiss, but he rallies in a flash of an instant, grabs a knife from the table and drives it into the thigh of the first Verger man to make a move for him. The cudgel drops from Matteo's hand. He falls to one knee, pulls the knife out, and quickly realizes the miscalculation as crimson sprays in a fountain from the severed vein. Hannibal doesn't look down to watch the guard bleed out, already grappling two more as the smell of blood and smoke start to sour the air, overtaking the hearty smells of the feast with the reek of fresh carrion.

It's Carlo's cudgeon that catches Hannibal under the ribs, knocks him back into the arms of another mercenary. Between the pair of them they drag him down to the floor, twist one of his arms behind his back to pin him there. Will stays frozen where he was at the onset of the carnage, stepped down from participant to resigned observer. A tool whose purpose is fulfilled, waiting to be sheathed away for the next bloody use. He stares bleakly at Hannibal, motionless and silent.

Mason steps between them, reaches down to lift the circlet off Hannibal's bent brow and lift it high, turning the wrought silver over to catch the flaring torchlight. All around the great hall, voices dim and grow quiet, watching, waiting.

He turns, glowing with self-satisfaction, to address the throng, the courtiers and servants all grappled or beaten or standing clustered like sheep clutching upended platters and pitchers of wine like makeshift shields. "Well," Verger crows, gleeful and verging nearly on impatient. "What are you all waiting for? Bow to your new Lord Paramount!"

The room swims like it's drowning under a deluge of cold water, every face pale and every movement sluggish and numb, but one after another they all bend the knee. Verger sets the antlered crown on his own head, slightly askew and turns a pointed look on Will, who shudders and grits his teeth before dropping into a bow.

Verger leers, wide and bloodthirsty, and strides over, reaching down to pat him on the cheek, just the wrong side of sharp enough to sting. "There's a good dog," he mocks, "Glad I could count on you."

There's a bitten-off hiss of pain from Hannibal, so well-hidden that he nearly misses it. Will glances sideways at the ire burning in Carlo's face and knows he's twisting his shoulder back nearly hard enough to pull it out of socket, eager to joint his carcass even before the slaughter. Hannibal's hair is loose and mussed and his lower lip is split, Matteo's blood spattered all across his face and neck. Through all of it his gaze is fixed on Will like it's carved in stone, never wavering, never blinking, eternal cold, flat judgment.

The Verger leer turns on him, next, lit up with blazing cruelty. "Thanks for dinner," he sneers. "And for the castle. Wish you could stick around to see what I do with the place, but–" Mason throws up his

hands and sighs. “Times being what they are, there’s really nothing for it. If I want this title to stick, I have to inherit it with your death. So we’re gonna haul you back to Muskrat Farm, and then….” he draws a ring-laden finger across his neck, makes an exaggerated rattling, choking sound whilst sticking his tongue out for the full comic effect.

Hannibal listens to this quite composed, expression affixed in a very nearly polite veneer, though his eyes are still dark and cold. “Of course one cannot make an omelet without breaking a few eggs,” he agrees. “How will you do it?”

“Oh, I have something very special planned for you,” Mason assures him. Will’s eyes flicker between them. He feels the weight of Abigail’s knife at his hip. “I’m gonna feed you to my *pigs*.”

Will inhales shakily through his nose and looks away. He asked for this, he reminds himself. He wanted it. Wants it, still. Barbed thorns tear through his flesh as the briars he is tangled in twist and tug.

“Come on, lets get my castle under new management. And then home again, home again,” Mason warbles, “Jiggity-jig.”

Leaden-limbed, Will rises back to his feet and scrubs a palm across his face. He ducks his head low and makes to follow.

“Will,” Hannibal calls softly, and he stops in his tracks. Braces himself and turns to look back over his shoulder. His black eyes are yawning dark and deep and he shows his teeth in a quiet snarl, jagged edges of seething anger and heartbreak. “It seems I was wrong about you.”

Meeting the force of his gaze is a dull agony. Will bears it with gritted teeth. “Now you see me with clear eyes,” he agrees roughly and tilts his head. “I’m sorry to disappoint.”

A blank cast falls over his proud, bloodied face before he rallies, snarl going sawtoothed, letting go the mantle of dignity to let a more wild, monstrous pall darken his face. “You may cast aside your promises when they no longer suit you,” he offers up like augury, “But I never do. I will kill you for this, Will. Remember that.”

Will laughs, startling himself with the abrupt, rasping sound of it. “You already did,” he chokes out, the words spilling off his lips like bile.

There’s a beat of silence. He lifts his shirt far enough to bare the gnarled white line of the scar on his belly and tilts his chin up. Hannibal’s eyes fix on it. Now, late as the hour might be, the light of recognition dawns.

“All the carnage,” he says and drops the shirt with numb fingers. “All the butchery, it all begins to blur after a while, doesn’t it? All the livestock look more or less the same at the slaughter. You took everything I had away from me and you don’t even *remember* it.”

But Hannibal’s eyes are fluttering shut in answer. His still, smooth face is fixed in quiet reverie, nostrils flaring around a slow, deliberate inhalation like he can call forth the memory from scent alone. Will scoffs at the display, disbelieving, but when his eyelids lift again the black pools of his irises glisten like dew. “There was a girl,” he muses softly. “A fawn who came to the defense of a wounded hart when she should have run to spare herself. She had your eyes, I believe.”

Will’s chest aches with the lack of air and he unsheathes the dagger at his hip in a brusque flash, striding forward to slip the flat of the blade under the soft line of Hannibal’s chin. The soft, stubbled

skin there bends against the steel, pliant and ready to part. “You called her brave,” he says roughly, “And then you cut her throat.”

He can still see the shine of Hannibal’s eyes, though his gaze is fixed on the place his knife touches skin, so close to the scar Matthew left on the side of his neck. He could open it again here and now. “Tell me her name again,” Hannibal exhorts and Will can’t tell from the unaffected *civility* of his tone whether he means it as a deliberate taunt or a true expression of interest, of curiosity.

“Abigail,” Will tells him. He can feel the burn of a tear on his cheek.

Hannibal smiles, and that twists the blade in the wound and makes the edge of the knife Will is holding to his neck press hard enough to leave a red welt against the unbroken skin. “It was an honor to have met her,” he professes, simply, and Will–

He–

“Mister Graham,” Mason calls suddenly, impatient, loud as a brass horn and twice as scathing. “*Down*, boy. You’ll ruin all my fun if you bleed him out like that! Tsst!”

Carlo tugs on the arm he has bent behind Hannibal’s back, pulling him away from Will and the knife kissing his neck. Will growls harshly with every intention of darting forward and spurning the order, finishing this, taking his life, taking what he was promised–

But he… doesn’t. He watches the other mercenaries drag Hannibal back another arms length, out of reach, and strike the butt of a cudgel against his temple to truss him up and heave him over their shoulders. Carrying him away to Muskrat Farm, to await Lord Verger’s pleasure.

He stays there, frozen, and looks at the knife in his hand, polished to a razor edge and gleaming in the torchlight, cold and bloodless. He sheathes it at his side again.

Mason lifts a hand in an imperious and haphazard meandering wave, standing at the threshold of the hall. “Come *on*, you meatheads, we don’t have all *night* here!”

The stone foundations of Ravenstag only scorch and stay standing, but the rest is shattered to ornate fragments or up in flames. Will watches fire catch at the fringe of a tapestry and climb up the weave of the fabric. He takes the apple from the boar’s mouth, wipes it on his tunic, and bites down. It sticks in his throat like blood and ashes.

Chapter End Notes

it was fucked up and gay coded when Judas did it and it was fucked up and gay coded when I decided Will had to do it. and I won't apologize

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

> once again HI FOR THE LOVE OF GOD HELLO. YES. we are close to done i am close to done and MAYBE I'm procrastinating a little because I will be sad when there is no more fic to write. even tho I know I will be shifting straight into hannibal bingo mode bc my dear hunter crafted me SUCH an exquisite bingo card for it
>
> content warnings: still unsurprisingly lots of graphic violence and death. and some actual torture too yippee! I would say also the passive-suicidal-ideation shades of Will's perspective kick into higher gear here and in chapter 19 too so be aware of that going in if you need to be. And pls do enjoy I did these cruel things to him as a gift for you and for me

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He drifts a dozen paces behind Lord Mason like a wisp of shadow, dutiful and silent. Pennants with the Verger rampant boar are strung up on the walls by the same sellswords who tear down the old ornamentation, scourge and plunder and pocket what can be pawned off. Some of the old guards kneel at his feet and take a new oath of loyalty with the changing wind. Some are dragged away in chains. Some are piled in the center of the courtyard like waterlogged kindling. Ravenstag smells like a slaughterhouse now, the fetid steam of butchery rising under the blanket of the falling rain. Hannibal's creation is remade new in the image of Muskrat Farm.

Will lets his gaze wander across the expanse of destruction and death and his jaw clenches. It's the ugliest thing in the world.

"What do you think, Will?" Mason announces, joy and pride shining in his face. He leans forward against the parapet, overlooking the flooded piazza. Will swallows down the urge to tip him over the side. Hannibal first, he reminds himself, then Mason.

"It suits you," he grits out. "My Lord Paramount."

Mason preens, running his fingers down the soaking wet fur draped across his shoulders. "It *does*, doesn't it? And I have my loyal bloodhound to thank."

Will takes a deep breath. Hannibal first. And then Mason. Everything past that is a blank void, but it doesn't matter. All it takes is to make himself a traitor twice over and he can die a free man.

He averts his eyes, tilts his head in a deferential incline. "Will you let me have Lecter?"

Mason's eyebrows twitch up and he turns a grin over his shoulder at Will. "Give my dog a bone?" He leers, then laughs. "Seems like a missed opportunity to deprive the little piggies of a free range dinner. They like live food, you know, these ones. Special breed I've been working on. It would take him a long time to die." A thoughtful crease bends in his brow and the sight sends an apprehensive shudder down Will's spine as he taps a ringed finger against his smiling lips. "Or I could put the pair of you in a cell together, make a game of it. Survival of the fittest. One dies hungry and one gets a warm meal. Would you like that?"

Will swallows. “I just want to finish it,” he says. “I want him to die. That’s all.”

Mason’s smile is sharp and taunting, the price of giving him the advantage of having something that Will wants. He should have finished it before, down in the great hall, when he had the chance and the knife already angled to Lecter’s throat. He still can’t grasp at why he didn’t. “Say pretty please,” he says. “And I might let you.”

Will bites down on a growl and turns away.

“You know what your problem is, Will,” Lord Mason hums, reaching out to pat the side of his face, heavy-handed and cool. “You have too much pride.” His fingers tangle in the rain-soaked hair plastered to Will’s cheek, brush it behind his bloody ear in a facsimile of a caress and then muss it again. His eyes are harsh and bright, blank and gray as the crumbling stone. “It’s nice that you’re spirited, of course. My sister’s the same way. That’s my favorite thing about her. No fun to fill a stable with docile, broken ponies. But I have to admit I am beginning to tire of all this chomping at the bit. Aren’t you?”

Will is silent and still while Mason searches for something in his face, some kind of reaction more than deference or resentment. He feels his way blindly through the landscape of the question. “Where is Lady Margot?” he asks after a moment. “She didn’t come here with you?”

Something very dark and dangerous swirls in Lord Verger’s eyes and he knows he’s given the wrong reply an instant too late. The smile on his mouth flickers wide and serrated and he drops his hand away from Will’s face with a high bark of laughter. “Oh! Ha! Will, please, I’m not a monster. Margot couldn’t be expected to travel all this way in her *delicate* condition.”

Will frowns. He sees, abruptly and too clearly now, that there has been a seething anger simmering quietly underneath every word and look and gesture Mason has given him. Not only tonight but prior to it, at least since their meeting after the trial by combat. He’s hidden it well enough to let Will mistake the pique for base jealousy or impatience. But there is something much deeper there, hiding beneath it. He tilts his head, slowly. “Condition.”

“Captain Crawford!” Mason greets, with an effusive call past Will’s shoulder. “Good of you to join us. I was just giving Mister Graham the happy news.”

Jack’s face falls. “You’re still here,” he says, terse with discomfort.

“Job’s not *done* yet,” Will snarls, wrong-footed, hair rising on the back of his neck, cold rain making him blanch and shiver. “What news?”

“You should have gone already,” Jack interrupts sharply, stepping between them. “Run, like I told you. Get out of here.”

“What’s going on, Jack?” Will says, harsh and furious, because now that he understands enough of the murky warning he was given he sees that Jack left it deliberately just a little too late, unwilling to risk Will backing out of the coup or compromise his chance for justice. “What news?” He repeats angrily.

Behind him, Mason groans, scrubbing a hand over his face, and waves lazily to the closest guard. “Carlo, kill the Captain, would you please?”

Jack grits his teeth and reaches for his weapon, but the mercenary moves faster, whirls and drives the point of his shortsword into his neck between gorget and helm. Will’s old friend makes a choked

noise, eyes wide, and falls to his knees. Blood soaks the stone, washes away in the pounding rain as fast as it spills.

Will sucks in a breath. He steps back and collides with the brick wall of another of the stonefaced mercenaries, finds a hand clamping down heavy on his shoulder. He tries to shrug it off and the grip goes vise-tight, held more firmly in place so that Mason Verger can step closer and open his arms wide, theatrically felicitous. “I am going to be an *uncle*,” he announces, smiling blithely as if the interceding violence never occurred. “But you knew that already, didn’t you?”

The words ring in his ears like a blow to the head. Will has enough time to feel his eyes go wide with wary comprehension before Mason nods sharply, and he earns another, much more tangible blow to the head as the butt of a sword collides with his skull.

“Throw him in the cart with the Vulture,” he hears dimly, just before the world tilts sidelong into a black void.

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The stream is dried up, the riverbed narrow and empty and full of crackling dust. The overgrowth of the forest has gone sparse and bare, full of skeleton limbs and dead trees, burned black and lifeless. Only dead things belong here.

Will wanders like a ghost through the barren woods, all the familiar landmarks stripped away, and doesn’t know which way to turn. He walks in circles, following his own footsteps for lack of any better trail to follow. Staggers forward on tired feet and rests against the crumbling bark of a scorched tree, calling out, “Hannibal!” in a hoarse, dust-choked voice.

He doesn’t expect to hear an answer and he doesn’t get one. He doesn’t quite know why he calls out anyway. Will pushes on, dragging through charred remnants, and calls again, a lonely, echoing refrain.

Staring through the cage bars of the dead branches, he catches a subtle flash of motion from the midst of a snarl of thorns and staggers toward it until his way is blocked by the tangled briars. He can see it clearer, nearly reach out a hand and touch one flank of the shadowy form of the horned hunter, stained in mud and blood and soot and sweat; wounded, wrestling feebly within its bonds. Its eyes are dark and full of fury and when they land on Will they go blank and flat. The monstrous face curls into a disdainful snarl and the trapped beast turns its back on him.

The thorns close in around him and he disappears. And Will is left alone.

※

The first splash of cold water wakes him, already bruised and shivering, arms aching where they are strung above his head, spread and laced tight to a hanging beam. He blinks up through blurry, darkened vision at the swirling shadows of the ceiling and then watches them solidify into shape, the familiar yawning mouth of the Muskrat Farm dungeons, cold blue moonlight filtering in.

A rope winch squeals and he is tugged upright in its wake, pulled taut until only the tips of his toes scrape the ground, brackish pink water still dripping off the end of his nose. Will jerks and kicks his legs for balance and slowly fights to catch his breath. He’s too disoriented and sore to remember how he got here for a moment. Then he does remember and goes still, eyes falling shut in despair.

“Rise and shine, Mister Graham,” Mason leers. There’s a stutter-step heartbeat of a windup before Will feels a fist lash out and strike him hard in the stomach, just beneath the ribs. His whole body sways with the kinetic force of the blow, no way to brace against it, and he wheezes harshly at the impact.

It made a harsh sound. Skin on skin, he realizes, grimacing when he glances down and sees his shirt hanging around his waist. Will feels his bare feet scrape against the stone and then sees his boots unlaced and discarded in a muddy corner of the cell.

It’s not only Mason standing before him. Two guards flank him too: Carlo, of course, the perennial favorite, and another that Will knows a little less well. A woman, tall, with a scarred face and an uneasy grip on her sheathed weapon.

“Do you know,” he drawls, stepping back and shrugging off the heavy fur cloak pinned to his shoulders, “why you are here, Will?”

Will squares his shoulders and catches his breath as much as he can while twisted into an uncomfortable position. “I assume you’re going to tell me either way,” he grunts. “Since I’m something of a captive audience.”

Lord Verger laughs dryly, claps his palms together and throws the cloak over the back of a chair. “So I am,” he says, “So I am.” He paces, tracing over the instruments hung on the walls, slowing with his fingertips fondling the long, leathery lash of a scourge. “I do not *like*,” he announces, softly, “being kept out of the loop. I never have. Secrets, lies, things which are hid from my sight… it frustrates me, Will. It vexes me.” He twines the length of knotted rawhide between his splayed fingers like a lover’s hair and then lets it go. “As delightful as it is to see my baby sister swanning around in the family way. I’m very enthusiastic about bringing forth the next generation of Vergers, you know, we just *love* to expand. But it makes me sad that she tried to hide it from me, Will. I just can’t imagine why she would do that.”

Shivering intermittently and swallowing thick anger and disgust, Will stares back at him, chin tilted high.

After a moment of this deadlocked glaring, Mason breaks and throws up an exaggerated sigh. “You have to know this puts me in an awkward position, a Verger baby popping up. Little tyke might even be in a position to *inherit*, right?” He shrugs, looks exasperatedly to the guards. “And you know Margot, she can be so pathological. Mean-spirited. *Jealous*. She might get bright ideas about removing me from the line of succession in a permanent way. And I can’t have that. Obviously.”

Will stares and stares, imagining a hundred ways to kill him with just one hand free. Mason smiles like he can see the visions swimming behind Will’s eyes.

“Did you know what she was planning?” he asks, straightening up and tucking his hands behind his back. “Is that what the two of you were getting so chummy about in your secret little talks in the dead of the night?”

The guard over his left shoulder clutches tighter at her weapon and her eyes flicker down and away. Will’s attention drifts to her for a fleeting flash of a moment. He sucks in a quiet breath and grits his teeth, then flexes his bound hands.

“Lady Margot asked for my help,” he divulges. “To have a child.”

Mason's face goes flat and his eyes shine like carbuncles in the flickering torchlight, pale and red. He takes the scourge off the wall, leather wound around his hands like a serpent. He laughs, sudden and bright and cold. "You know, I heard rumors, but I didn't actually think you had it in you, Will. Impregnating my sister behind my back, thats…" He tuts, soft and sharp, then strides closer, alight with gleeful fury, and cranes until his face hovers close by Will's, seizing him by the jaw. "And I assumed Margot would be a little more discerning. She's always had her persnickety little hangups, you know, made herself damn near impossible to marry off, but apparently any stray mongrel was good enough after all."

Will offers him a blank look and a thin, grim smile and then pitches forward and spits in his face.

A thick glob of saliva spatters Verger's cheek and he staggers back a step, releasing his hold on Will, wiping the offending wetness away with one thumb while blinking in astonishment. He stares down at his hand and then looks back up to Will, shaking his head faintly. "You should have said no," he sighs, and steps out of sight, letting the whip unfurl to drag across the stone to trail his footfalls.

Will huffs. "How could I?" he says, heavy with bitter derision. "I am a humble servant of House Verger. Your will is my will."

He locks his jaw and waits, but Mason takes his time to formulate a response, sucking in through his teeth with a slow, infuriating wet hiss. Leaving Will to sway unsteadily on the balls of his feet and anticipate the advent of his retribution. "Not at all, Mister Graham," he says at last. "You're more than that. You're *family*," he snarls, then lays the first burning lash on his shoulders.

The crack of the whip is loud and bright in his ears, pain blooming like a serrated blade of ice across taut skin. Will jerks, anticipatory of the pain but unable to brace for it, and barely settles before another blow follows on its heels and then a third, on and on relentlessly. He can't tell which is the first strike that lands hard enough to lacerate and draw blood, but he tastes it sharp in the air as he pants, an atmospheric fizzle like a breaking storm.

The arms suspended above his head make it hard to draw breath and his vision swims, dizzy and dark at the periphery. Mason watches him for a moment and cracks the whip hard across the middle of his back, where it makes his spine bow reflexively. Will breaks his stubborn silence with a harsh grinding howl of pain that claws out of his throat and leaves it shredded and raw in the wake.

"*There* we go," Lord Verger whoops and hits him again, sharp with satisfaction. Will buckles and swallows a yelp as the knotted leather thongs bruise and split skin like blunted teeth. He tugs so hard at the bindings on his wrists that his fingertips go numb and icy cold, tries not to bite down on the inside of his mouth or give Verger the satisfaction of hearing him hurt. He builds his fortress walls deep inside, surrounding the little that is left to him. It's not such a hard thing to pull back and retreat behind them.

The real trial, as always happens in times of siege, is the getting back out again.

The sensation goes dim and distant and Will hangs limply in his bonds, taking every strike with a flinch and a soft, rasping huff even as blood start to drip hot and tacky down his back. Mason's taunting voice prickles at his skin, but his focus narrows to the rushing tide of his own heartbeat and the pulse carries him away until he is somewhere else.

Deft hands wringing out a linen washcloth, diluted red streaming over knuckles. Perfumed steam in the air, the smell of cinnamon and flowers in the dead of winter. The damp cloth rises to dab softly at his face, washing away the grime and easing the sting. A hand cards softly through his hair, tugging at

the curls behind one ear where the sensation makes him shiver. There's another voice soft and warm in his ear.

"There," Hannibal says, while the pad of his thumb rests against the stumbling thump of Will's jugular, moving in slow soothing circles. "Just so. Good, Will. Very good."

Will leans into the touch, eyes shut tight, breath coming shallow and shuddering and thinning gradually to a wisp of bitter, self-deprecating laughter. He turns his face into Hannibal's hand where it curls around the nape of his neck, drinking in the scent of his pulse at the wrist like a balm.

The smile in Hannibal's voice is rich and warm, aching with pride. "My wolf," he murmurs. Will shies away from the praise like a blow and his teeth catch the inside of his cheek hard enough to draw blood.

His head wrenches back, tugged along in a harsh bend that arcs his face up toward the mildew dripping down the walls. Mason's fingers are twisted roughly in his hair, pulling hard enough to feel the ache in his bruised skull. His back is a tattered patchwork of layered lashes from shoulder to hip, the knobs of his spine crisscrossed with aching welts and burning open wounds. Every nerve screams and pulsates as he shudders back to himself with a lingering lightheaded disconnect, floating outside of his own head, a bright buzzing hum in his ears.

"I said," Lord Verger repeats, "That you are being *rude*, Will. I have a very full schedule, you know, and here I am taking the time out of it to deal with you personally. The *least* you can do for me is pay attention." His free hand traces across the jagged line that feels like the deepest mark, raw and open and curving across one shoulderblade. Will jerks feebly in his bonds, unable to help struggling to get away. "I suppose a thank you would be too much," Verger prods petulantly.

Will swallows against the arc of his throat, steeling himself to breathe through the blistering pain. "You're going to be dead by morning," he vows in plain terms. "I'll make *sure* of it. You have it coming, Mason. "

There's a split-second uneasy beat of silence from the nobleman and then a sharper twist of the hair twined in his fingers, a self-satisfied huff. "You are in no position to be making me promises like that," he rebuffs. "You're already dead, Mister Graham. Let it sink in now, save yourself the trouble."

He shoves Will's lolling head back to droop against his heaving chest, then tosses the bloody scourge to the other guard and rounds on Carlo. "I loosened him up for you," he announces. "Flay the rest off of him. With your dullest knife, please, but for god's sake don't get *sloppy*. I want the hide in one piece so I can give it to Margot for a mother's day present."

Mason storms out of the dungeon and tries to make it look like he isn't running away with his bristly little tail between his legs.

Will glares after his retreating back until he vanishes up the stairs and keeps staring long after he's out of sight. Carlo cracks his neck and takes a menacing step closer, flicking out a pocketknife, but Will pays him no mind.

He raises an eyebrow and turns back to watch the other guard step forward and wrap the whip around Carlo's neck from behind in a lightning-quick chokehold. She sets her jaw and pulls taut until the big mercenary goes red in the face, cursing and clawing at the rawhide lash. Will watches him choke and splutter, impassive, and then feels his mouth flicker into a sharp ghost of a smile as he sinks to the floor.

The guard bends quickly over his prone form and braces herself, then grasps his head firmly in her gloved hands and twists until bone cracks. She wets her lips and doesn't quite meet Will's eyes when she rises and murmurs, "Thank you."

Will manages a short, wavering nod. "The, ah, feeling's mutual," he says, then appends a slurred, awkward, "...milady," as her name escapes him.

She smiles thinly. "Judy."

"Judy," Will echoes, trying to school his face into less of a death mask. "Of course. And, uh, congratulations."

Her face goes a little bloodless, the thin puckering scar across her cheek pulling white, and she looks away. "You know."

"I had a hunch," he concedes. "And a knack for reading faces. I already know Lady Margot didn't catch pregnant from me. I told her she should find someone she liked better." He pulls himself upright as much as he can with his grip on the rope binding his hands and grits his teeth as the motion ripples along his bloody back. "I promised that if she got what she was looking for, I would help her protect it."

Judy's eyes flicker back to him and her face sets in hopeful calculation. She has a kind look to her. Strong, earnest, and gentle. Easy to see why Lady Margot picked her.

After a moment she squares her shoulders and flips Carlo's pocket knife around in her palm. "Lord Verger's holding her in her chambers, under guard. He hasn't hurt her yet, but I know it's only a matter of time."

Will keeps his jaw clenched, feels it pulse as he nods in acknowledgement. He wets his lips and tastes blood on them, salty and sweet. "Where's he keeping Lecter?"

"You still want the Vulture?"

"We have," Will chokes on the words. His shoulders spasm with the strain of holding his weight. "– unfinished business."

Judy exhales slow through her nose and then reaches down to her belt with her free hand, unhooking a key without looking and reaching out to lace it onto Will's belt. Then she reaches into her purse and pulls out Abigail's knife in its sheath. Laces that on beside it and clasps the buckle again. "Fine," she allows. "Help me save Margot. I don't care what you do after."

Will acquiesces with a nod and she steps closer. Judy digs the pocketknife under the rope around his wrist, pulls with the flat of the blade until the hemp weave splits and falls away and then frees his other hand, too. He falls onto the balls of his feet and nearly into a crouch, lightheaded with pain and lost blood, catching his hands on his knees. She braces him with one gloved hand against his shoulder and then steps away to retrieve a waiting wineskin and empty it out in a red river over the raw marks of his beating. His hands clench in the fabric of his trousers, curl until his nails scrape his thighs like unsheathed claws. Will hisses and shakes his head at the searing burn, sucking in a few short, sharp breaths to clear his head before he straightens again.

He bares his teeth, already stained red, and scents the air, eager for the last leg of the hunt to begin.

Chapter End Notes

Listen I am sorry to piece this portion of Alana away to a different character but I REALLY wanted her around at Ravenstag and did not see my way into how she could be in both places at once. So Book Wife it is! Flipping a giant breaker in my character creation lab that is marked TRANSGENDERFICATION BEAM in bold lettering and sending her out. begs the question of whether Judy Ingram is related to Clark Ingram if they're both in this 'verse, and hey. maybe. she sucks a lot less than her cousin tho that's apparent

ANOTHER thing I regret is Jack Crawford's relatively small role in this AU bc he is, of course, my Dad and my token straight friend and the third side of the protagonist triangle and what holds the whole thing up. I will do better by him in the future

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

> OKAY WELL. I actually cannot wrap my head around how much happens in this chapter but I do know writing it felt like donating blood probably past the point of accepted medical limits. so if you don't mind I am gonna go sit down and refresh up with this juice box and a cookie and you all can enjoy the agonies
>
> content warnings: a real doozy of graphic violence, mutilation, death and suicidal ideation

The guard has his back turned when Will lunges. His throat is cut too swift and too deep to do more than gargle faintly on his own blood as he falls. He dies before he sees what is happening to him, what is coming. Some of the others saw Will coming and raised arms to fight back, but it didn't spare them. He moves through the halls like a shadow, like a plague, passing from one man to the next on a wisp of wind and leaving them sprawled in his wake, blood pooling through the floorboards thick and fast enough to warp and rot the wood. Death comes in like a flood.

There's another posted at the door to Mason's solar, loitering obediently and in no particular expectation of an attack from any quarter, but especially not the bolt from the borrowed crossbow that sings into his mouth as he opens it to call out, pins him briefly to the wood with a hollow thunk.

Inside, Lord Verger's snide voice echoes, terse with impatience. "Cordell?"

Will smiles grimly. He tosses away the crossbow and steps to the periphery, back flat against the wall, breath caught softly in his chest.

After a long beat of silence, Verger sighs and pushes back his chair. "Honestly," he grumbles, "You just can't get the staff these days." His footfalls sound closer to the other side of the door, before it opens a crack to let the nobleman's head poke out. "Cordell, there had better be a–"

Will's arm strikes out to snatch a fistful of his fur collar and slam his forehead into the door, then shove him bodily back into the room and stride after. Mason splutters and stumbles, wrong-footed. He jostles hard into the table at the center of the room, upends a pitcher of wine to spill over the surface in a dark claret flood. His wide, rolling eyes fix on Will and he laughs, loud and startled.

"*You*," he wheezes with a manic giggle, as Will seizes him by the shoulders. "are beginning to seem like much more trouble than you are worth."

With a flat sneer, Will bends him over the table and raises his fist. Mason's brows slant in surprise and he kicks out, more frantic instinct than good sense, but his knee has the luck to catch Will under the ribs. He hisses in pain and Mason kicks out again, connecting with the side of his thigh this time, buckling his leg. In a twisting pile of limbs and a clatter of wood on stone Will and Mason and the table all shift sideways to scatter over the ground.

The leg of one chair splinters and breaks off, showering them in a hail of splinters, and the already empty pitcher of wine clatters with a hollow ringing of hammered metal. Will grasps for the edge of

the table as it falls away. Abigail's knife tumbles out of its sheath and slides across the floor. Will's shoulders meet the marble and pain flares white-hot behind his eyes, makes his limbs lock and an agonized shout catch in his throat. The tail end of the sound stifles and dies, squeezed out by Mason's grasping, opportunistic hands wrapping around his neck in a chokehold. He laughs again, uproarious and exhilarated, like the whole thing is the funniest joke he's ever heard.

Will bucks and claws at him, but his grapple holds firm. His vision swims and goes dark at the edges, leaving only Verger's leering face at the center of his field of view. "Poor Will," he crows, tightening his grip. "You just can't win, can you?"

Oblivion ebbs quietly at the spalling bluff of Will's consciousness as he gasps for air. He throws one helpless arm out to the side even though he knows the knife is far beyond his reach. Too late to save himself, always too late, doomed to die trying.

Then, in the spinning dark, a hand touches his hand and he feels the kiss of cold steel against his fingertips.

Mason's face swims above him, sallow with a vicious, triumphant curve to his mouth. The smile bends and twists as Will strikes out and sinks the dagger into his side. He makes a low, surprised kind of gasp, gray eyes going wide and white and rolling back a little in his head. Will heaves bodily until they both roll to the side and then clambers on top of Verger, abandoning the knife still stuck under his ribs in favor of a more impulsive kind of personal touch.

Will braces himself with one hand in Mason's hair and the other gripping him by the jaw, lunges down with his mouth open wide, and *bites*.

A racket of screams feels his ear and the bright, hot taste of blood coats his tongue, skin splitting and tearing beneath his teeth, rending away in ragged strips and leaving exposed flesh. Part of the lower lip tears off and hangs loose, a wide crescent moon splitting apart his cheek. As Mason squeals he spits out a chunk and bites down again, catching the lower part of his nose and tearing into that, too. Mason wriggles so desperately to get away that Will's grip on his hair starts to tear it out at the roots, but Will is a dog with a bone now and he won't give it up so easily.

It takes a few bites to do enough damage to halfway satiate the howling beast in his chest, blood running thick down his chin and cloying in his throat. The nobleman's screams go thin and whimpering. He leaves his mark, as indelible as the one Mason first branded onto him, then he stops, breathing ragged, and summons up the strength to let go.

Once released, Verger doesn't strike back, but he lets out a wheezing giggle and curls in on himself, hands clutching protectively at his mauled face. Will wrenches the dagger free again and heaves Mason upright by a hand fisted in the collar of his shirt. He stands, hauling the limp weight of his prize, just as the door to the solar opens again.

Lady Margot stops mid-stride, belly round beneath her fur-trimmed gown, arm thrown over Judy's shoulders for support. The glow of pregnancy suits her. Freedom will suit her even better. Her hair is half fallen from its braid and her eyes are glassy and distant, but she rallies with all the resilience that has served her survival through the years, clearing her throat and clenching her jaw tight as she takes in the state of her brother. Probably the state of Will himself to boot, still caught in the posture of a wounded animal.

Her mouth trembles very slightly before she gives voice to the words. "Did you kill him?"

Will meets her gaze and shakes his head, deliberate and careful. “He’s alive. He’s yours,” he says slowly. “If you want him. Murder or mercy?”

Margot’s face stays regally impassive, though the flat line of her mouth trembles at the corners and her pale eyes dart back and forth, considering, half apprehension and half relief. Judy, with one gloved hand around her waist, only watches and keeps her steady. After a moment’s silence her head tilts, an echo of grief and a small, quiet smile flashing over her face. She sighs. “I think I already have everything I need from him.”

Will nods and steps forward to let Mason fall at her feet. He blinks up at the women and stirs feebly in recognition. “*Mar*got,” he slurs. His brows twitch downward, pulling into a supplicating frown. “Maybe… maybe I was. Too *harsh*. Can’t we – renegotiate?”

Lady Margot reaches back and clutches tight to her lover’s hand, then steps forward and sets her foot down on her brother’s throat. “Oh, Mason,” she answers flatly. “Go to hell.”

Will watches the choking rattles of breath crushed out of his gasping mouth with a satisfaction that is more a mirror of hers than a feeling that belongs wholly to him. He stands to the side, still clutching the bone handle of his hunting knife in a hand tacky with blood. Gradually his attention drifts to the fifth figure in the room, standing and watching quietly as she has since pressing the knife back to his hand. Waiting patiently until the deed is done.

Once Will lets his eyes flicker in her direction he can’t bring himself to look away again, though he must look more than half-mad staring into an empty corner of a dark room like the vacant space there is calling to him. The light and air and color.

Abigail glances back at him, one corner of her mouth lifting in a silent greeting. He wonders if death looks different to the dead. If there’s a kind of potent beauty in it from the far side of the veil.

Mason wheezes and goes quiet. Lady Margot lets out a shaky breath as she stands over him, looking at the emptiness in his eyes. Her face is wavering between expressions, caught in the process of deciding how to feel, unable to parse through the thousand contradicting impulses. Thinking the same thing as Will, probably, that its strange to have him gone with the scars he left still lingering. That all of it should vanish at once.

She staggers back again. Judy catches her by the arms and keeps her upright as she founders, coming over slightly wild-eyed. “Oh my god,” she whispers. “I’m going to be a *mother*.”

“A good one,” Will says before he can stop himself, turning to the lady and her guard. “Both of you.”

Margot grins broad and bright, before her gaze flickers back to her brother’s corpse and dims a little. “If I ever had children,” she says, voice thick with regret. “I wanted to give them this place. Raise them here. I don’t want to leave it.”

“You don’t have to leave it.” When he speaks she looks to him, brow furrowing. Will squares his shoulders. “Not if you tell the right story about this.”

Margot smiles dryly. “What, pretend that I didn’t murder my brother and take his title? I think a little suspicion is bound to fall on me no matter what excuse we dream up.”

“Tell them–” Will’s fingers twitch on the knife in his fist and his breath hitches. “Tell them Lord Lecter did it. Tell them that he escaped. Tell them that I *aided* him.”

She stares at him in silence for a moment, mired in blood and half-savage, until she finds enough of her old confidante to recognize him by, a sad smile tilting her mouth. “You said you’d help me secure a legacy, but I didn’t really expect you to make yourself a fugitive for my cause. Is that what you want?”

Will shrugs, impassive, and says nothing.

Judy, still bracing against her back, tilts up her chin. “You’re leaving anyway, aren’t you?”

He nods, fingers still flexing against the bone handle, and inclines his head deeper to Margot in a last brief show of deference. “Goodbye, Lady Verger.”

“Will,” she sighs, one hand on the swell of her stomach and the other faltering, nearly reaching out and thinking better of it. “Take care of yourself, alright?”

He turns and limps away with a shadow close on his heels.

An echo takes up the sound of his steps as they round the corner and retreat down the winding stairs. The shadows reach for him and he ducks out of sight to avoid the sparse handful of guards still patrolling. Will escapes the keep and breaks toward the stockyard. The glow of moonlight is sickly and silver, filtering through the breaking clouds as the storm disperses, shading everything with a dreamlike quality. Glimpses of some other world breaking through the veil that separates it from this one.

“Will,” Abigail calls after him, then makes it a refrain, “Will, *stop*–” keen and barbed, the plea catching between his shoulderblades and hooking in until he halts mid-stride. She catches him up in a handful of light footfalls and her hand curls around the crook of his arm, another quick anchor.

“Let go, please, Abigail,” he says, evenly, not looking back at her.

“Where are you going?” She steps closer, to the edge of his vision, craning up on tiptoe and trying to catch his eye, a stubborn set to her jaw. “Back to Hannibal?”

“Abigail,” Will growls.

She clutches hard at his arm, small fingers digging in. “What will you do when you get there?”

Something pulls tight in Will’s throat and he grimaces around the blood painting his teeth. “Why?” His voice goes sharp and hoarse. “Want to watch me kill him too?”

Abigail stares harshly up at him, her seaglass eyes hard and flat. He looks back to watch a steeling breath and a confident jut of her chin. “You’re not going to kill him.”

Will looks fixedly at her and feels his face pull inward, drawn in disbelief. “You say that like you plan to stop me.”

“You don’t need me to stop you,” she refutes, her voice like a low hum of rippling water.

Will looks down at the scarlet-spattered flat of the knife in his hand and exhales sharp and ragged. It takes a long, dizzy moment to force himself to draw the next breath in and by the time he does he’s already wavering on unsteady legs, Abigail’s grip on his arm more bracing than holding him back as realization breaks in a dense, crashing wave, almost knocks his feet out from under him.

He stares at her, vision blurring and tunneling, and reaches out a hand to brush the hair back from her cheek, tuck it behind one ear and hold her there, clasping the side of her face with his bloodstained hand. His lip quivers, throat working under the hot gall of the abject guilt sitting like a ball of fire in his stomach.

"Will," she says softly.

"Forgive me," he rasps. "For betraying you, failing you, choosing *him* even after–"

"I helped him," Abigail cuts in, harsh and sudden, her eyes flickering quickly to the side and returning to meet his with a glossy sheen of fear. "I helped my father. We hunted together."

Will's trembling mouth falls slack. "What?"

In the low sickly light of the moon her face is pallid and bloodless, save for the stain Will's palm leaves behind when it drops. Abigail wavers and her face skews younger, frightened and sad and small. Her head ducks to one side in a motion halfway between a shiver and a shrug. "The other girls. They were my friends, but I lured them in, let him butcher them. Elise, and Marissa–"

"That isn't true." Will shakes his head quick and jerking, blinking through the wave of cold unease that douses the fire in an instant. "You weren't – a part of it."

"*Will*–"

"I would have seen it," he snaps, teeth flashing.

"You did," Abigail pleads, with a tremor shaking her narrow shoulders and a miserable, slanted smile on her face. "You always have. You just made yourself look away." She looks to the ground and the wind blows cold between them. "I didn't want you to hate me," she whispers in a strained, small voice.

Will exhales, harsh and pained. He clenches his jaw, scrubs a hand over his face, and slowly opens up his arms to her. Abigail's brow furrows and then she darts in, quickly, winds around him in a fierce embrace. It makes the raw lacerations across his back seize and ache, but he grits his teeth and holds her closer, buries his face in the crown of her head and muffles a sob into the soft dark hair. "I don't hate you," he promises. "I could never hate you, Abigail, shh–"

He can feel the whisper of her warm breath against his chest, over the numb skin of the Verger brand. Light and air and color so vibrant and strong that she feels almost alive again, resurrected in his mind's eye to finally put the old grievances to rest, dig up the ghosts of old doubts and fears and bury them again together, hand in hand. She shivers again in his arms, holding tight around his middle.

"I forgive you, Will," she promises, thick with grief and joy, and corrects, faltering, "Dad." Her temple falls against the crook of his shoulder and her throat works. "Will you forgive me?"

The knife never left Will's hand, stained too thick with scarlet to catch his reflection when he tilts the flat toward the sky. He bends and kisses the top of her head, gentle and full of feeling. She turns in his arms, back to his chest. The edge of the blade lifts easily to her throat as she turns, almost an unconscious impulse, and he knows the choice has been made for him. "I will. Of course I will."

Abigail shudders just once in trepidation, but Will makes a soothing noise under his breath, holds her safe and close as he slits her throat ear to ear in a single swift, clean drag of the knife.

Blood sprays dark as oak gall ink across the cobblestone, sparkling in the thin moonlight like shards of obsidian. She goes pliant in his arms, spilling like water. It takes all the resolve he has left in him to finally let her go.

Abigail's shape disperses even as she falls, scattered into glimmering dust and blown away on the wind. Will watches the last curling wisps of it and imagines he glimpses the distant flicker of a firefly amid the stars.

He shuts his eyes and pries open his curled fingers, one stiff, rigid joint at a time. The knife drops to the ground.

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The greeting comes before the door has a chance to shut behind Will.

"You came." There's a kind of implacable grace that Hannibal lends even to his captivity, despite the indignity of his surroundings and his position within them. Wrists and neck locked into a pillory, spine bowed low into the kind of slight arch that would quickly grow painful with prolonged endurance. Will's back is probably in a worse state, half flayed and matted to his borrowed shirt with clotted blood and sour wine, but he can feel a sympathetic twinge for Hannibal's discomfort nonetheless. "I was beginning to doubt that you would come," he pronounces. "Truth be told, I had expected you sooner."

Will steels himself with one hand against the fence that pens in Mason's new pets, who raise tusks and snuffle hungrily at the newcomer. "I'm here now."

"And you came unarmed." Hannibal tilts his head as much as he can in its fixed position, his dark eyes scourging Will's skin deep enough to draw blood for the second time tonight. A noble, placid look that bleeds quiet defiance. "We can finish what we began at dinner the night before last. Will Mason Verger be joining us again?"

Will drifts into a slow, diffident shake of his head, nearly propping himself upright. "No," he says, hoarse and low. "Only you and me." He knows some of the hurt and weariness must show in his face, hard as he tries to mask it. Will has spent time as an ill-kept dog and he knows how to conceal a wound, but he does not know how to hide from Hannibal, not truly.

Nor can Hannibal hide from him now. There's a tightness around his face that speaks to meticulously obscured pain, a rigid blankness to the set of his mouth, where a split lip is near reopened with the pull of tension. But his eyes go dark with interest.

"Did you kill him?"

Scrutinizing, Will seeks out the ragged edges of the hurt Hannibal is hiding and spots a tremble in the set of his shoulders.

Hannibal's chin tilts stubbornly higher as he notices Will spot his lapse. "I thought you might," he says. "After you had finished with sealing my end. Although you are charmingly hard to anticipate in any kind of detail. How will you kill me?"

Gritting his teeth, Will steps closer, circling around the pillory until he can spot the raw, peeling discoloration in the center of his back, raised and red. A symbol he knows well.

He reaches out to trace the edge of the fresh burn without conscious forethought, feels Hannibal stiffen up like marble under his touch before resolutely pushing past the physical interaction to continue his obdurate, one-sided interrogation. “Will you do it with your hands?”

Will stares long and hard at the brand that marks them now as a matched pair, a foolhardy claim overwritten within an hour of its making. It will heal cleanly, at least. He lifts his hand away, aware that he is stalling for time, prolonging what needs to be done.

“I wanted to,” he rasps out the admission, backing away again to stand before Hannibal face to face. “Though I planned to make you beg for mercy first.”

Hannibal’s mouth curls into a jagged facsimile of a smile, lips parted only a little, slick and red. “Beg,” he echoes with fond cruelty. His nostrils flare and the smile vanishes as quick as it began. “Do you believe you could?”

“What I wanted to do,” Will murmurs hazily. “What I planned to do.” The rough wood caging Hannibal in is coarse under his palm, splinters a hairsbreadth from piercing through the skin. “It feels distant. Insubstantial. Like smoke. I reach for it and it slips through my fingers.”

There’s a beat of held breath as Hannibal’s head turns again, listing to the side to contemplate him with a hard, penetrating stare. “Better to allow your instincts to guide you, then. To decide what it is you truly want.”

“I know what I want.” Will steps closer. “I’m not at war with my nature anymore, Hannibal. I’m embracing it.” The key hangs heavy on his belt, but the cool weight of it dancing against his fingertips is grounding. The knot of the leather cord unlaces and drops into his palm like it was called there. He turns it over between his fingers, cold dull iron that smells of going to rust. Will grapples the heavy steel lock bolting the pillory shut before he can think better of it and thrusts the key in, twists and pulls. He throws the latch with a breathless flourish.

For a moment Hannibal doesn’t move. His face is flat and abstruse, his eyes shadowed too heavily to find a light of revelation in the crimson-tinged sheen of his irises. Will will admit to a little curiosity about what he will do.

He straightens to his feet by slow degrees, pushing the stocks up and away from the flexing tendons of his shoulders, easing himself free and stretching like a sleeping lion woken, eyeline never straying from Will’s course. The horns of the hunter stretch over his head, wide and heavy and dripping ichor, and his fingernails score the wood frame like hooked claws.

“And what comes next, Will?” he asks in a voice drenched with slow malice. “Freeing yourself from me?”

Will stares at him, mute, pulse thudding in his ears, until the fluttering unfurling of a feeling curls in the pit of his stomach. It rises in his throat and sits warm in his mouth like a tongue of flame.

“I forgive you,” he sighs.

He scarcely sees Hannibal move. One minute he is still as stone, throat working and gaze fixed and blank, and the next his hands are wrapped around Will’s neck with a force great enough to lift him off the ground. He drags Will back by his heels and shoves him against the paling of the pen hard enough to knock the breath from his lungs. Will chokes out a harsh, agonized wheeze as his back makes contact with the rail, face going bloodless as scabbed wounds tear open anew. Hannibal snarls and

bends him backwards until he's nearly at the tipping point, and he pigs snuffle louder in excitement, gathering below him.

At this vantage, Will can see his eyes. They are not hidden in the shadows any longer. They *burn*.

"If you will not," he says in a voice abraded raw with a gordian knot of emotion too tightly braided to separate into its component strands. "Then I will do us both a good turn and free myself from *you*."

Will cringes in pain but makes no move to break his hold. He smiles, crooked and tremulous. They are caught in the snare together, thorned vines winding around them both and cutting deep. Will knew well enough when he came here that he was going to his death. In some ways that was not any kind of effective deterrent. Hannibal extinguishes life with such an artful, practiced hand. He killed Will once before, broke him apart into so many fractured pieces, and still Will loves him with every last jagged shard. What's one more death? A gift.

He swallows, heart fluttering under his ribs like a wounded bird, and raises one hand with a shaky finality to cup the curve of Hannibal's marble cheek.

Hannibal's hands tighten around his neck and Will's feet slide against the straw, close to pitchpoling over the rail, holding frantically on for another final glimpse of him, and another, and another. He stares down at Will, at Will's hand on his face. Something seems to fracture.

"We live in a primitive time," Hannibal murmurs, in a low voice that might be meant only for his own ears. "Don't we, Will? Neither savage nor wise."

Will feels his smile soften.

Hannibal's hand on his throat uncurls until his thumb is stroking faintly along the ridge of his chin. He inhales, slow and deliberate, then frowns. "Half measures are the curse of it," he scoffs, swallowing the words down until Will almost cannot hear them over the wild thundering of his heartbeat.

He steps back onto his heel and looses his grip, relinquishing Will roughly to sprawl at the foot of the paling, lightheaded and painted with more spilled blood than there must be left to course weakly through his veins.

Hannibal's dark eyes slide away and refuse to meet his, hard as glass and twice as brittle. His jaw pulses tightly.

"If I see you again," Hannibal pours the vow out like it had to be cut from his chest, held in his hand like a beating heart. His voice is thick and rasping. "I will be the last thing you ever see."

Will's vision swims and he stares dizzily up at the looming lord, uncomprehending. Blunt rejection scrapes against the core of his heart, raking small sharp claws across his innards. Flaying him from the inside out. Words stick in his throat like spurs of bone, digging in, drawing blood, but he manages a feeble, injured, "*Hannibal*–"

The blurring shape of him is more distant than it was before, stalking away until the night swallows him up. Wounded panic seizes every twitching muscle in Will's body and he breathes in sharply, reels and staggers to his feet too late to stop Hannibal before he is gone, gone–

Will braces himself against the yawning door of the stockyard and stares out into the trees. The pale sliver of the moon drifts behind the treeline. The whole world dims.

Gone.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

> OKAY WELL I'm giving myself exactly zero turnaround between finishing this chapter and posting it out of sheer enthusiasm so if there's a gratuitous misspelling give me a moment i will catch it on my next rereading and fix it right up
>
> content warnings: canon-typical violence and death, and some language that could mirror disordered eating for the purposes of starvation-as-metaphor throughout

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There are few empty seats left in the tavern by the time Will walks in, trailing the faint trills of a northerly wind and scattering dead leaves on his heels. The air is full of gusting warmth and the smell of food and wine, the sounds of laughter and a little lisping drunken song from the very merriest patrons. His stomach cramps uncomfortably with a pang of hunger. Nobody minds his arrival as the door falls shut behind him. Even the man at the bar seems unaware of his approach, doesn't turn his face up from the mug he polishes in his rough hands to acknowledge Will until he catches his notice with the silver flash of a coin.

He nods and waits in polite silence as his drink is poured. His feet are heavy and sore with too much walking, beard rough with too many days growth. His half-lidded eyes flicker through the throng of strange faces with dismissive interest until they drift eventually to the quietest corner and the woman seated at the table there.

Not a strange face, though hers is turned away from him too, only the soft line of her nose and the proud ridge of one cheek visible. Her gloved hands rest on the table, armored in tooled leather, her black hair up in a knot at the nape of her neck.

For the first time in a long streak of weeks, Will's lips twitch up into a smile.

She looks up with a wary, sharp glance as he takes the empty bench beside her and then sharpens further with recognition, one hand drifting below the edge of the table for the hilt of a shortsword. Will sets down his mug and uncurls his fingers, showing her his open palms and the empty sheath on his belt.

Chiyoh stares rigidly at him with candlelight flickering in her dark eyes for a minute, lips pressed tight together. "You should not be here."

The smile is still caught on one corner of Will's mouth. He raises an eyebrow. "I shouldn't really be anywhere. If we're being exact."

She lifts her fingers away from the hilt with a slow twitch and takes a draught of her wine. "You have a bounty on your head," Chiyoh says carefully. "Will Graham. And a writ of outlawry, too."

Will drinks from his own mug, though he barely tastes the ale on his tongue, alight with buzzing excitement at renewed proximity to his goal. "Lady Bloom is generous," he agrees. "Never been an outlaw before."

“You led a treason against two lords,” she chides him, lightly scathing. “And pushed her off a turret.”

“And she lived,” he refutes. “And won a stronghold and stewardship over the north for her troubles. Broken bones can mend stronger.”

Her bright, dark eyes soak up indignant incredulity, and she taps her fingertips against the edge of the table. “And broken hearts?”

Will swallows hard around his ale, and sets the mug down with a blink. “That,” he says, quietly, “I am less certain about.”

Chiyoh is silent, but curiosity warms over her cold indignation until the corners of her mouth twitch down, and she asks, flatly. “Why are you looking for Hannibal?”

“Who says I am.”

“Please,” she sighs, amused. Chagrin warms Will’s cheeks. He buries the twist of his expression in the mouth of his mug. “You did not find me here by accident.”

The wind outside the walls picks up from a gust to a low howl and cold autumn rain falls across the thatched roof with a patter. Will’s tongue traces over the points of his teeth and darts out to lick his dry lips. He falls into an insouciant shrug, staring sullenly at the wood grain between his fingers. “Are you going to tell me where he is?”

Chiyoh leans back in her chair until the shadows fall across her elfin face. “My cousin and I are not as close as you and he once were, Mister Graham. I do not go where he goes, or presume to keep him on a leash.”

He nods, slow and weary and a little listless. “No,” he exhales with a flippant ghost of a smile. “Of course not. Probably across the sea by now, isn’t he? Halfway around the world. Making a new life, forgetting the old. I gave a little thought to doing the same.” He picks up his cup, turns it over and empties it out onto his dry tongue. “But there’s not enough of me left for fresh starts.”

Something changes in her face at that, though it doesn’t show on the surface as more than a flicker of light in the shadow. Her mouth stays pressed in a thin line, hawk eyes peering darkly at him, feathers ruffled before they smooth over into a gradual ease.

Chiyoh leans forward again and her head lists a little to one side. “We are not so far from the old Lecter keep here.” Her brow peaks in an eager tilt. “Only a stone’s throw to the border. I could show you the way in the morning.”

Will stares at her, at the flicker of the candlelight in her face, at the soft quirk of her birdlike mouth. His hollow belly yawns below his ribs like a bottomless well.

“Show me.”

※

Chiyoh takes him down the road past the edge of the demesne where the path is overgrown in ivy and the trees are painted the color of fire, beginning to shed their signs of life to strew them underfoot in a bed of gold. They sit double on Chiyoh’s mount, a roan who glances back at Will as full of leery suspicion and distaste as her rider.

The rain left the road half washed away before it abated. Hooves sink into the soft mud and send up splashes, fat drops fall from the canopy of the trees to dash on the backs of their necks. Will's hair hangs around his face in a damp curtain. A thin fog hangs low over the hills as they crest the ridge and catch the first glimpse of the castle ruins.

Chiyoh pulls up on the reigns as they pass the first craggy outlook. A little ways ahead is the low stone wall and the gate, hanging open and half-fallen on rusted hinges.

"This is as far as I take you," she announces, brisk and cool. "Make your own way from here."

Will laughs dryly as he slides out of the saddle and lands ankle-deep in a puddle, brushing his tangled curls back and staring up at her with a mordant amusement. "Thanks for the ride," he huffs. "Why? Something dangerous on the grounds I should know about?"

Under the hood of her cloak it's difficult to make out any detail of her expression, but what he sees is not particularly contrite. "The building is not in good repair, and there have been few inhabitants. The last time I returned, I found that there were some places I could no longer safely go," she agrees dryly. "You might have a little more luck. Or not."

She whistles clear as a bell, echoing a little off the stone, and the roan's ears flick sharply as it obeys and turns to canter back down the path toward the town. Leaving Will behind without another backward glance.

He stands under the lee of a gnarled oak and watches idly until the churning growl of his empty stomach drives him onward. Will exhales slowly and ducks under the bent wicket grating to stumble through the gray-white mist that shrouds the crumbling shell of Hannibal's childhood home.

He envisions the place as it was in its glory, the forest always looming a little dark and wild but the turrets of the keep standing proud and tall into the sky. White stone shining as bright in the moonlight as it did in the sun. The soft, lively patter of footsteps echoing, children's laughter in the distance. A scattering of firefly-lights studding the gardens like fallen stars. He reaches up to bite down on his leather glove and tear it off with his teeth, presses his bare palm against the crumbling, dirty stone. There is no heartbeat within it. It is still and it is cold.

Behind him, across the vacant courtyard, the snap of a branch echoes like the clatter of clashing swords. Will whirls around and stares wide-eyed in the direction of the sound, but he sees nothing except the haze of the fog through the trees.

He tucks his gloves into his belt, pulls his hood up, and walks on.

It's difficult not to feel pursued, as though the echo of his footfalls are another set walking behind, as if the chill of the fall air was a ghostly breath on the nape of his neck. Every shadow might grow the tines of a set of antlers, huge and dark, a moment before the points drive between his shoulderblades and gore him through and through.

His foot catches deep in the mud and sends him stumbling until he rights himself with one hand against the gnarled trunk of a tree. Will pauses there, breathing heavy, blinking away a wave of dizziness and waiting for the tremble in his fingers to still.

He straightens again, shivering either with the cold or something deeper.

Will doesn't venture past the walls of the castle itself as the fog lifts and the night gathers, feeling too unfortified himself to hazard the breach. He finds a gamekeeper's hut standing empty with most of a

roof still overhead to keep out the rain still misting down like it wants to rise up and flood the place until the last stone is washed away.

He gathers enough dry kindling for a fire and digs out flint and tinder from his pack. The flames lick up in red tongues, barely kissing the numb chill from his fingertips. Even the smoke carries an old, dusty smell.

It's been a strange thing, getting used to being alone. In some ways he hasn't really accustomed to it at all, only trained himself to endure the pain just well enough to keep from wasting away to nothing. Like a long hunger. Will misses Abigail like a limb cut away and Hannibal like the very beat of his heart. He curls around himself under his cloak, back to the wall, and stares out into the shadows beyond the glow of the flames until his eyelids sink heavy and close over his restless searching. His empty stomach turns in on itself, clawsing fitfully at the walls of his guts and keeping him awake until the fire burns itself down to ash.

He wakes with the sound of hoofbeats in the dark.

Will shifts upright and lets the cloak slide off his shoulders in a hoarse rustle of wool. Stands to pad on silent feet to the doorway and peer through it, holds his breath and watches a patch of darkness separate from the treeline and resolve itself into the shape of a black stag. Tall enough that its antlers tangle with the branches of the trees, heavy enough that the impact of each step rattles the ground. It chuffs, breath fogging the air, and turns its head toward Will with eyes that burn like ice.

Astride the stag, armored and crowned and dripping rainwater in a ceaseless patter over the courtyard stones, the horned hunter watches Will with its face obscured by a thick iron helm. After a moment it reaches up slowly to draw a curved bow from its back, long and wreathed in jagged thorns. The hunter notches an arrow with deliberate, deadly grace and draws back the string. The point is leveled at the center of Will's chest, where his shirt is unlaced to expose the visible gauntness of his ribs.

Will stays where he is and holds his breath still, watching solemnly.

Out in the forest beyond the call of an owl on the wing scores the silence with sharp claws. Will blinks to find himself still curled under the cloak, staring into the cold ashes of the fire in the gray light of dawn.

He shifts awake by degrees, combs tangles out of his overgrown hair and laces up his boots – worn so thin that he can feel every pebble through the sole. Will kicks dirt over the ashes and stumbles out of the hut to find a pool of rainwater clear enough to wash the grime from his face.

There's a statue in the gardens that used to bear some Lecter forefather's face and now stands without a head on its crumbling neck, a stone bowl still tucked gracefully in its granite hands, half full with reservoir of the passing storm. The cold water stings his fingers and his cheeks enough to wake him up, quenches a little his dry mouth and aching throat.

As he bends to dry his hands with the hem of his tunic, he sees the footprint in the mud. Will stills and bends further to look at it. A little wider than his own and deeper, made by a boot with a thick, heavy sole. Fresh enough to have been left scarce hours before, or minutes.

There's no real reason for the sight to strike him with such an unshakeable familiarity, no real evidence to lend weight to the thought, but Will still staggers back with the breath caught in his chest, searing like sudden fire. If someone is here with him, walking this place like a restless ghost, it cannot be anyone else.

“Hannibal.” The name tears out of his throat in a raw whisper, quiet and fierce like a prayer. He looks around, wild-eyed, tracing the footsteps along the flooded path to the crumbling keep with its crenellations of dark windows. There is no answer, but he knows beyond all certainty that he is heard, seen, and awaited.

What awaits him when he is found, he knows with much less certainty. But as before, as ever, the hunger drives him on.

His footfalls quicken, following the fading tracks with fire in his eyes and a heated urgency pounding in the sepulcher of his ribs, beating like a drum in the deep. Will clambers over one low crumbling wall and then another, shouting “*Hannibal!*” again, loud and unchecked. The rasping echo of his voice bounces off the stone like the struck strings of a dulcimer, noise and clarity. Birds take to wing at the sound and flutter away, startled by his approach.

The mist drifts freely through the half-dismantled halls like the borders between inside and out have crumbled too far to delineate between them, molded carpets scattered in fallen leaves, undergrowth pushing through the cracks in the floor. The tracks aren’t so clear now, but Will does not pursue his quarry with a hunter’s eye.

Will stumbles down a half-fallen staircase, rounding a corner at the bottom to look into a wide, circular antechamber crenelated with collapsing arches. One gnarled limb of a tree twists in through the opening of the wall, long shadows stretch in every direction until they overlap and blur. “Hannibal,” he calls out again, listening for his reply with bated breath. After a moment, something moves in one shadowed corner.

Will turns his face toward the flicker of motion, heart in his throat, and takes a step forward that puts him just out of range to catch a dagger between his shoulderblades.

He hears the quiet song of the honed steel slashing out at his back, feels it pass by close enough to send gooseflesh prickling up his arms and falls instinctively into a crouch, ducking and rolling low away from the strike. He turns his head midway through the roll and glances over his shoulder. He does not know the attacker by their shape.

The dagger swipes out again, carves through the air toward Will’s face, and he throws up an arm to shield himself, panting and crawling back on all fours like a cornered animal. His off hand snags the empty space on his belt where he used to keep a knife and then scrabbles through the crumbling stones at his back for one heavy and jagged enough to use in self-defense.

He doesn’t know the face of the man striking out at him, vicious and bloodthirsty, but he understands the type. Sees an echo of an older self in his eyes, mercenary and cold, dealing in the profitable business of butchery. Will remembers Alana’s writ of outlawry on his head, incentive to any man who recognizes his face to cut him down on sight like a mad dog. He thinks of Chiyoh’s sidelong glances to the other patrons of the bar, sharing a look with one behind Will’s back as he turned away to retire to his room for the night. Nodding in silent invitation. A coin crossing a palm. A snare set to wind his foot in.

A raw, rough kind of laugh sticks in Will’s throat and trickles out between shaky breaths as he dodges a few more swipes of the knife and takes a few more hits scored along the broadside of his arm, shallow cuts that sting white-hot and drip dark blood across the stones. He glares up at the sellsword and bares his teeth, ready to fight to the last, to meet his end uncowed and unbroken–

–and like a breaking wave, another shadowy figure closes around the mercenary, grapples him away and sends him sprawling to the ground with a growl caught in his chest like rolling thunder. Will

knows the sound better than his own heartbeat.

They tumble down together, the dagger caught between them, the sellsword turning with the tide from hunter to prey in a flash of an instant. The muscles of Hannibal's shoulders ripple under his cloak and Will sees the flash of his eye, the sharp pulse of his jaw, fierce as a wildcat with its teeth locked in a quarry. Will is breathless with awe of him as he watches the pitched throes of the brawl, every whisper of air burning in his spent lungs like furnace smoke.

The mercenary cries out in wordless terror and Hannibal grips him by the throat and *breaks* him, bone cracking like old wood. His limbs spasm once and go still. Will's tongue darts out to press against his lower lip at the sight.

Then Hannibal hisses and drops to one knee, and his hand clutches at his abdomen and comes away red.

Will's throat dries right up and his empty stomach *lurches*.

"No," he hisses, scrabbling onto hands and knees, palms scraping roughly against the stone. He reaches Hannibal's side as Hannibal spills the rest of the way to the ground and comes to rest on his back, staring up at Will with his eyes dark and shining, a smile catching the corner of his mouth and pulling it aslant. "No, n-no, Hannibal–"

"Hello, Will," he says roughly, "We must stop meeting like this."

One of Will's hands lands over his, pressed tight against the place where the knife gored him, at one side of his belly, a little above the hip. Blood bubbles up to darken his shirt and Will grabs a fistful of the fabric to shove it harder against the wound, while the other–

–he doesn't even hesitate before cupping it over Hannibal's throat, covering the pink line of the scar there. It's an instinctive action, something he needs to do. He feels the rabbiting pulse, quick and full of the rushing tide of life, ebbing and flowing under his fingertips. He bends further to press his temple against Hannibal's own and breathes there, rough and rasping.

"You – should not have come after me," Hannibal chides, a little stubborn heat in his voice, mere ashes where the anger was once a roaring fire. "I expected never to see you again. Foolish of us both – I suppose."

Will smiles, wide and watery. "I needed you," he exhales by way of explanation. "I still need you, Hannibal."

The pulse under his palm skips and his eyes slide half-mast, still fixed on Will's face. "I'm glad you came," he admits softly, before he slumps back and says no more.

Will stays bent over him, foreheads pressed close together, every breath grating in his throat like sand, hot blood pulsing between his fingers. Then he sits back and reaches up to pull the shirt from his back. Pries the bloodied knife from nerveless fingers and puts it to work.

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Hannibal doesn't stir again until the sun rises to its zenith and sinks again, brushing the top of the trees and painting them redder. He lies too still under Will's borrowed cloak, the shadows of his face strange and sallow with the lost blood. It was a little strange and sallow before he took the wound too, if Will is honest with himself. Sunken in at the edges and around the eyes. Hollow with hunger.

Will has suffered a famine of the soul for all the long months since their parting. He thought that he had taught himself to bear it without complaint until the pot starts to boil over the fire and the steam rises, fragrant with the scent of roasting meat. His stomach gnaws itself with blunted teeth, cramping painfully with its insistent emptiness, and his mouth waters so heavily he has to press the back of his hand to his lips to keep saliva from spilling out, swallowing it down endlessly and watching Hannibal shiver softly in his sleep, and waiting, and waiting.

The sellsword's tunic doesn't fit Will as well as the one he tore to ribbons, a little short in the arms and worn through at the elbows, but he knows that he would be shivering even if he were swaddled head to toe in wool and sweltering under the summer sun on the other side of the world; it's the effect of having Hannibal stuck under his skin.

He stirs the stew over the low red flame and watches a firefly-light flicker in the trees out beyond the crumbling walls of the old ruin. Or maybe only the memory of one, out of season.

"I missed you," he says, low and rasping. "The first time you left me for dead. When all I knew was how to hate you. I'd never felt hate so strong, it bordered on worship. I felt like I – like we were going through the same motions at the same time, without ever seeing one another. Without even knowing your name."

He turns back over his shoulder, finds Hannibal's eyes open, yawning wide and dark and fixed on his profile in the firelight. His chest is still under the cloak-blanket, breath held carefully under his ribs like a stray exhalation might frighten Will away or dispel him into light and air and color.

Will has an intimate understanding of the feeling. Words feel dull and heavy on his tongue, with his eyes fixed on a face he did not think he would see again. Almost *unneeded*, past the profound sensation that their souls are brushing up so close against one another that it would be easy as breathing to pass thoughts directly from one heart to the other without a word ever spoken aloud.

And yet the question flits between his teeth almost unbidden and slips out, voiced soft like a prayer. "Is this where you ate her?"

Hannibal swallows and shifts up onto his elbows, grimacing faintly at the pull of his bandaged stomach. "In this very room," he murmurs, then tilts his head, considering. His nostrils flare with a careful inhale at the steam rising from the pot in front of Will. "It's where I thought I might eat you when I saw you had followed me home."

"What part of me?" The idea strikes Will with a bitter whimsy, bubbles in his chest like a laugh. He smiles and pushes a little further. "My heart?"

"Every part of you," Hannibal corrects, his palm resting over the bloodstain of his knife wound. "I would suck the marrow from your bones."

Will's stomach turns over on itself with another pang of hunger and the smile lingers on his face even after his lips fall flat. He turns back to the fire, ladles a portion into one bowl and then the other. Stands to cross the room and takes a knee to present the offering.

Hannibal's hands curl around the sides of the bowl and he stares at the rich, hot broth with the tender meat inside. Will's jaw pulses with the urge to press closer, but he holds the fragmented border between them, stepping away again to take up his own portion.

Hannibal looks at him with an impenetrable expression and a light gleaming in his deep-set eyes. He nods, civil and courteous, and eats his own kill. Will follows after him, nearly burning his tongue in

overeagerness.

Red leeches from the sky and leaves a spilt-blood darkness. “You never went back to Ravenstag,” Will ventures after a little time has passed in quiet. “You could have.”

The reply is slow to come. Hannibal lifts the nearly empty bowl to his lips. A runnel of broth drips down his chin. “It would not have been the same.”

“It changed so much after you left it?”

“*I* would not have been the same,” he concedes, terse, with another flicker of a grimace, as if the admission carries the same dull ache as the wound. “Does that answer gratify you, Will?”

He feels the corners of his mouth pull upward again and ducks his head low to keep from grinning too shamelessly with open satisfaction. Wordlessly, he shifts closer to take the bowl from Hannibal’s hands, then swipes the pad of his thumb across his chin, brushing the swell of his lower lip. He goes still when he feels the heat of Hannibal’s palm against his side, fingers slotting between his ribs like he might reach through them.

“You said,” he begins. His eyes are flat and gleaming as they search over Will’s face, full to the brim with the light of unsated hunger. “You forgave me.”

Will sways closer, falling into his orbit, mouth dry and heart beating a knocking tempo against his sternum. “I remember it.”

A quick furrow pinches between his brows. “I have found that difficult, to–” Hannibal falters and the tacit admission of frustration sits strangely on his tongue. “Perhaps my understanding of your motivations is. Fragmented.”

Their temples knock together, just a quick brush. Will’s jaw flexes for a moment, chewing on the response. He pulls back a little, far enough to unwind the strips of shirt bandaging the shallow gauge from the sellsword’s knife, inhaling softly so his nostrils fill with the copper tang of blood and the herbal sweetness of crushed yarrow. He stares down at the puffy, tender crimson of the wound in Hannibal’s side and rests his palm over the jut of his hip.

“Do I seem mercurial?” His thumb brushes out toward the puckered edge of the wound and Hannibal’s fingers clamp around his wrist, stopping the exploratory motion, holding it still.

“You seem to have a natural affinity for it.”

Will’s tongue flicks against the point of a tooth and his head tilts to one side. “My feelings about you,” the admission surges out of him in a gust of breath. “Are not something that I am able to control, or *predict*. Or – negotiate, Hannibal.” He searches the other man’s face for any sign of comprehension, finds it flat and still and closed off to him. He hesitates before plunging forward with a frantic hitch in his pulse and an unarmored rawness in his voice. “There’s no controlling who you love, or what you will forgive them. It just happens.”

Hannibal stares. The hand he had swept along his side and down to his belt shifts to press the dull point of the sellsword’s dagger harshly against his gut, somewhere at the center of the jagged old scar. His other hand grips Will by the nape of the neck and his teeth grit against each other, half-bared.

Will feels the tension leech from him all at once and he relaxes into the embrace. Next to the cold prickle of the steel it's easier, much easier, to say for a second time, "I love you."

The crack in Hannibal's stalwart defenses happens with an audible wavering inhale and then a quick collapse, every wall reduced to spalling fragments. Will tips forward until his head tucks in below Hannibal's chin and his arms wind tight around his neck. "My wolf," he hears, near-inaudible, muttered into the tangled curls at the crown of his head. Or thinks he hears, wishes, hopes–

"Don't send me away," Will gasps, lungs heaving like a bellows. "Kill me, hate me, just let me follow you. Let me go where you go. *Please*."

Hannibal's arms around him are iron bands. His breath is hot against Will's temple and a tremor shakes through him, horror or laughter or the cold wind clawing at his back. "Will," he says with the tremulous fervor of a vow, "I said before that I would keep you by my side always, do you remember it? We are of one mind."

Will twists in his grasp and seizes his throat between his teeth, over the old scar. He holds it in his jaw without breaking skin for a heartbeat and then another, breathing heavily, before he releases him. It leaves a mark that will darken to a bruise. Will props himself up on his elbows. "One hand," he says, half a growl. "One heart."

He closes his fingers around a fistful of the filthy bandages, grasps Hannibal by one wrist and snatches up the dagger, too. Hannibal doesn't flinch as the blade kisses the scraped-thin parchment of his palm, dragging across until a line of fat ruby drops blossom out over the skin. Will gives his own palm a matching wound and offers it up, smeared in red and trembling faintly.

Hannibal lifts his uninjured hand to Will's face, cupping his cheek, and grins wide enough to show a bright flash of teeth. Their hands press together, fingers twining as the improvised ribbon-length of bloodstained cotton winds around them both. The breath stays frozen in Will's chest as he watches it. "There," Hannibal says agreeably, and ties off the knot. "One life, and one death," he appends to the vow and draws Will in to a kiss while his lungs still burn with the startled awe of being given exactly what he asked for. Hannibal draws back, mouth red and wet, and breathes. "That is, if you will have me, Will?"

The air rushes out of him in a shuddering sigh and he squeezes Hannibal's fingers tighter between his own to feel the rush of their pulses pressed up against one another. No one to witness them but the stars above their heads, no titles and no crowns to complicate the exchange. Nothing to either of their names save the freedom to bind them up together, but Will hardly has a need for anything in his life that's not Hannibal, Hannibal, Hannibal–

If he misses his crown so much then Will will make him a wedding present of another. But he ventures to think, looking at their tied hands, at the blistering-hot adoration in Hannibal's eyes, that perhaps both of them have already found everything they want.

"Oh, yes," he promises. "Bones and all."

Chapter End Notes

I just think there was simply no other way to go for me than to have them end up 1. married and 2. on the lam together it's simply the pattern that these characters fall into most naturally. You

can BET they do some high crimes and misdemeanors and honestly? Maybe scheme their way into legitimizing Will and being absolute terrors with another noble title and this time Hannibal can be the pretty boy favorite? Maybe they are content to live in the woods like wild animals and pick off anyone who comes looking after them? A little column a a little column b is the ideal to me

THANKS everyone who's been generously giving time to a WIP and urging me on because this is, as I have mentioned, about twice as long as the next longest piece I have ever written before and has been a whole new exercise in pacing for me as a writer. AND thanks to the Folie a Deux discord server for their encouragement through the back half of this fic also it's so nice to create fanworks in a group together and cheer and clap and scream and howl and kiss on the lips about our mutual passions. Hope to make a lot more in there!

End Notes

Tell me what you think here! Or tell me on tumblr or twitter, where I am also @wastrelwoods, or just check out more of the things I am saying and doing on the internet these days!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!